

JOURNEY

Al Kristopher

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Table of Contents

Title Page
Copyright Information
Table of Contents
Summary
1. Dilemma
2. Homecoming
3. Vengeance
4. Results
5. Restoration
6. Janus
7. Holocaust
8. Balance
9. Apocalypse
10. Trials
11. Problems
12. Free

Summary

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An epic story that stars Beatrix and Freya. The two warriors endure everything that fate has to throw at them, including each other, but perhaps their most challenging obstacle is enduring the journey of life.

1. Dilemma

JOURNEY

By Al Kristopher

Part One: Dilemma

Sighing, Beatrix regarded her fallen opponent with pity and irritation. Both were, of course, understated emotions: she found it quite impossible to believe that one such as this had so many “abilities”—well, they were supposed to be abilities, but Beatrix really had to wonder whether he was as great as he boasted. After only three friendly sparring matches, she concluded that he was NOT.

Still, she helped him up.

“Another try, sir?” she asked. The young man groaned, shook his head, and salvaged his ego.

“Ha! You know it!” he cried. Beatrix gazed at him wryly, a smug look plain on her face. She raised *Save the Queen*, and held it in a defensive position.

“Then whenever you are ready to test your fate, sir,” she dared. The boy grinned happily, and dashed forward with his primitive dagger. He sliced at her in vain, and she sidestepped the cut as always. Using the flat of her blade, she smacked him on the face, leaving a welt that would disappear with the proper amount of care and kisses from a certain girl.

“Ha!” laughed Beatrix. “It’s that same trick again! You will never defeat me if you keep using old tricks!” The young man groaned, nursing the sore on his cheek. A long, thin, red mark had been impressed on his face, and it stung like nobody’s business.

“Just tryin’ to go easy on you,” grunted the young man. In a flash, he was up on his feet again, ready for another shot. Beatrix sighed and shook her head.

“I don’t understand you at all,” she moaned. “You have heart; this is undeniable. I cannot defeat that part of you. Physically, though, I must say that you stink.”

“Hey! I’m not that bad, am I?” Beatrix snorted happily, and allowed a smile.

“No, you’re terrible. I don’t know why I had such a hard time fighting against you. I honestly cannot

believe how much of a fight you put up then—but then again, you had your reasons.” The young man shrugged, and as Beatrix reminisced on the past, he dashed forward and sliced at her with his daggers. Coolly, and still halfway stuck in dream world, Beatrix easily blocked the blow and tripped the young man. He fell with a WHUMP, comically doing a backflip in midair as he flew. Sighing, Beatrix walked over and gently laid her sword on the man’s shoulder.

“You’re beaten, again,” she stated. The young man moaned and pounded his fist on the ground, and in his usual carefree style, he rested his hands beneath his head. Beatrix smiled, sheathed her sword, and joined him on the cobblestone floor.

The time—one year, four months, and three days after the Great Restoration and death of Kuja.

The place—an empty square in Alexandria Kingdom, perfect for two friends to test each other’s skills.

The players—Beatrix, Captain of the Alexandrian Knights; Zidane, a mischievous young thief and object of Queen Garnet’s affections.

The status—peace.

“What’s on your mind, Bea?” asked Zidane. Beatrix hugged her knees to her chest and leaned her head back. Wood-colored hair fell backwards as she stared at the sky.

“How much of a wimp you are,” she noted. Zidane stuttered and wiggled in misery.

“Ouch,” he snorted. Beatrix smiled. “What else?”

“That’s all,” she shrugged. Zidane smiled that same carefree and slightly stupid smile of his.

“Aww, you really do care about me,” he sang. Beatrix faced him and aimed *Save the Queen* at his arm.

“Only as far as my sword can reach,” she said. Zidane grinned and winked at her, and Beatrix rewarded his efforts with a friendly poke to the ribs with her sword.

“Ow, hey, sorry. I forgot you already have someone.” Zidane smiled as always, but Beatrix regarded the boy with bridled irritation. He did not have to say any names in order for her to understand what he was talking about: Adelbert Steiner, that loveable goof who took charge over the Knights of Pluto. Strong of heart and body, but somewhat lacking in brains, the noble captain had formed

something of a bond with Beatrix since their time spent together during Garnet's coronation.

To her chagrin, though, Adelbert was a loser when it came to love. His sword had more romance in it than he did. Beatrix admired Steiner greatly, even though they had been at odds before, and really and truly did like him, but the big lug was usually oblivious to such admiration. For sure, she knew that he felt similarly, but Sir Rust Bucket (as Zidane affectionately referred to him as) was just not a Don Juan. He had an easier time fighting behemoths and monsters than he did expressing his feelings.

But that was all right. Beatrix was a patient woman. Oh, was she ever patient...

"Hey, you there?" said a voice. Beatrix snapped out of her trance, and looked up to see the sunny face of a golden-haired boy staring down at her. She rubbed her good eye and shook her head.

"I'm fine," she said, anticipating his question. She stood up, retrieved Save the Queen, and dusted herself off. "Another try?" she asked. Zidane shrugged.

"Yeah, sure, why not. You know that I won't hold anything back!!" As she saw him get into his attack

stance, Beatrix sighed the sigh of one who knew the outcome of such a fight. *Oh, well*, she thought. *If at first you don't succeed...*

“Captain!” Knight of Pluto VIII ran towards Steiner, an urgent look on his face.

“Haagen! What manner of business is this?” demanded the Captain. Haagen skidded in front of Steiner and almost collapsed from exhaustion.

“(gasp pant) L-lady B-Bea (wheeze puff) Lady Beatrix requests your (huff puff) your audience, sir!” Haagen then collapsed on the cobblestone street, puffing and wheezing his lungs out. Steiner regarded the out-of-shape knight with irritation.

“Stand up, man!” he demanded. “That is no way for a Knight of Pluto to act!” Haagen did not respond, though; he merely stayed pinned to the floor, wheezing. Steiner sighed, grasping his forehead in annoyance.

“You say that Lady Beatrix is asking for me?” Haagen paused, and looked up at his captain.

“Yeah, she asked me to get you,” he managed. Steiner nodded thoughtfully, applying his hand to his chin in thought.

“Hm, hm, yes, I see,” he coughed. “Must be something important! Well, thank you, Haagen!” With a bold salute, Steiner began trotting along the path and towards the castle. Usually, if Beatrix had asked for someone of high importance like himself to pay her audience, it meant there was either some type of crisis, or else the Queen needed something. Steiner, ever obedient and loyal, would then devote himself to whichever predicament had been thrown at him.

Beatrix smiled as the familiar *clank-clank* sound of Steiner’s armor echoed across the courtyard. Even in broad daylight, she could see the silvery armor he wore, and the fairly humorous way it squeaked. Steiner was a big guy, but even in a thick crowd he always managed to find some way to be conspicuous. Beatrix couldn’t help but love the guy, though: his heart was in the right place, even though the rest of him usually was not.

“Steiner,” addressed Beatrix, holding her fist over her heart as she greeted him. Steiner came to a halt and performed his finest salute.

“Beatrix,” he replied. “I heard that you have asked for me! What is it that you need? Is there some crisis? Does the Queen request something?”

“No, none of that,” said Beatrix blankly. Mentally, she sighed. *Why did I expect him to ask that?* she said. *Every time he’s called up by me or the queen, he always thinks it’s some kind of dilemma. Poor guy, all he really knows how to do is fight and take orders.*

“Eh, what do you mean?” asked Steiner, pulling Beatrix away from her thoughts.

“Well,” she began, “I, uh... just wanted to talk with you, that’s all.” A pause. Steiner lowered his head and rubbed his chin carefully.

“Oh.”

“Care to walk with me?” asked the lady, giving him a pretty smile. Steiner mirrored it only halfway and nodded his head.

“I, I suppose,” he managed. Beatrix smiled, knowing full well that Adelbert would have asked her first if he had the guts to do so. So with a *clank-clank* and a light *stomp-stomp*, Beatrix and Steiner began their walk.

“Ssh, don’t move so much!”

“C-captain...”

“He... he’s doing it!”

“All right, Captain!”

“Ssh!! I told you guys not to move!”

“Such a nice couple... Too bad my love live stinks.”

“That’s not all that stinks around here...”

“Hey, *I* shower!”

“Ssh!!! You guys are hopeless!!”

“I can see you there!!” shouted a voice. Steiner angrily pointed at the bushes, glaring at the knights who were spying on him.

“Ack, busted!!” hissed Weimar.

“Run away!” shouted Kohel.

“Idiots,” mumbled Breireicht. The three Pluto knights scattered as their captain approached the bush, and they made sure to never show their faces to him until at least the next week. Spying was a vice unsuitable for the Knights of Pluto, and the punishments for such a deed were especially wicked. Thankfully, Steiner had been in a reasonably good mood when he discovered his men.

“Halt!” he shouted. “Come back, you cowards! Running away will only worsen your punishment! For shame! Spying on your own captain!!” With a huff and a puff, Steiner gave chase to his delinquent soldiers, leaving Beatrix by herself in the courtyard. She had not spoken one single word to him yet.

“...What a revolting development,” she grunted, sighing in defeat. With a shake of her head, Beatrix departed for the interior of the castle, knowing full well that once Steiner set his mind onto something (like chasing down his immature knights), there was absolutely no stopping him. So, giving up on that prospect for the time being, Beatrix decided to retire into a nice hot tub, and would excuse herself from all duties for the rest of the day.

“Announcing Queen Garnet of Alexandria and Mayor Huffle of Dali!”

“After you, my lady!”

“Why thank you!” Queen Garnet smiled happily as Zidane held the door open for her; the mayor more or less had to pull the portal open himself. Making sure that her train didn’t become too dirty from scuffing against the floor, the elegant and regal

Queen Garnet of Alexandria entered the Grand Conference Room of Lindblum. It was that time again.

Zidane wisely sidestepped Minister Artania as he entered the room, and an announcer gave the call for the next guests.

“High Regent of Lindblum, Cid Falbool, and his Lady Hilda Falbool!” Cid and Hilda, arms linked, entered the room looking as regal and fancy as ever. Zidane, never one for great manners, addressed them as he normally would.

“Hey Cid, what’s up? Wow, Hilda, you’re looking nice!” The sophisticated couple smiled politely at his comment, and Garnet let the harmless flirt slide by. After all, how shallow would she be if she became jealous every time Zidane flirted with a girl? Considering him, she’d have to be an ocean.

“Representative Quale of the Qu marshes!” Struggling to get his bloated self through the door, Quale of the Qu clan waddled into the room with his tongue properly tucked inside his mouth. His student, Quina, had personally prepared the dish that would be served to the councilors that day.

“Queen Stella of Treno!” A groan escaped the mouth of a certain rude boy as the bizarre duck-lady from Treno entered the room. Quacking softly to herself, Stella was flanked by her servant and a coin bearer that had taken the liberty of bringing her Stellazzo coins with her. Garnet sighed at Zidane’s rude outburst, but almost blanched when she saw her uncle Cid groaning as well.

“Chief Ghiot of Conde Petie!” Everybody in the room, even Garnet, could not help but groan (or smile, in some cases) as the inevitable “Rally-ho!” echoed throughout the conference room. A short man with a strong arm and a thick beard marched into the room, two other dwarves with him. Like everybody else that had came before them, they squatted down in their respective seats.

“Mr. Number 266 and Person of Chairs Mikoto!” Zidane, sweet loveable Zidane, couldn’t help but wave as his sister entered the room with the black mage leader. Unlike the last few times he had seen her, she was wearing a smile on her face—she even greeted him back.

Birds of a feather, said Garnet to herself. *Birds of a feather...*

“Lady Eiko Carol of Madain Sari!”

“ZIDANE, HI!!!!!!” The bright young lad groaned in misery as the rambunctious young summoner bounced into the room, a tiny assortment of moogles tailing her. Some of the royal guards tried hard to hold back a laugh as the creatures cavorted with guests; others were clearly holding back their tempers. Eiko calmed down just long enough to be seated, though, and the conference’s opening minutes could continue.

“High Bishop Benedic of Esto Gaza!” With a silence that was usually the norm for holy men, the Bishop of Esto Gaza walked quietly into the room, two attendants tailing him. One audibly muttered how scorching the temperature was inside the room.

“And finally,” said the announcer, “Elder Vanderhaum of Daguerro!” An old man, sparkling with the mischief of youth and vision, waddled into the room with only his cane by his side. He joined his comrades at the table, and glanced around him to see who had attended.

“Oh, excuse me,” said Queen Garnet, “but where is the King of Burmecia? Is he no longer a part of this council?”

“I know not, highness,” replied a guard. “We sent word to him as per schedule. Burmecia may be in

the middle of a rebuilding effort, but Mognet should have managed to get in somehow.” Garnet paused, pursing her lips in thought.

“Maybe they’re late?” suggested Eiko. Garnet regarded her distant relative with disbelief.

“The King of Burmecia, late? That sounds very out of place. We would have received some kind of report if this were the case.”

“Let’s concern ourselves with that later,” suggested Cid. ‘I should call this meeting to order.’ He paused, just long enough to realize that he should follow his own advice. “Whoops,” he shrugged, “uh, this meeting has now come to order. All members of the Council of Gaia are present and accounted for, save the King of Burmecia.”

“Excuse me, Regent?” piped the mayor of Dali. He stood to make himself known. “May I make a suggestion to speculate on why the king is not here?”

“No, that would be a waste of time,” pointed Cid. ‘Speculate on other matters. We do not need *everyone* here, just a noticeable majority. I am sure the king will be glad of your concern, though.’ The mayor nodded his head and sighed, muttering

something about “how rank has its privileges and regents will always ignore a mayor”.

“Now, first order of business,” began Cid, organizing a few pieces of paper he had with him. “Your eminence, can you give us a status report on the Shimmering Islands?”

“I can give you nothing,” replied the Bishop tactfully. Cid grumbled.

“I see. Do you mean to tell us that there is *nothing* going on out there?”

“No, not a thing, unless you consider the wind and the waves.” Cid grunted, and a light babbling overtook the councilors.

“That is good news,” said the Regent. “I am glad to hear that all alien activity in that area has ceased. That is the way things should be. Now, I would like to have your all’s individual Mist reports and the Reconstruction conditions.” He paused, and one by one, the committee members began listing off their country’s efforts of rebuilding and clearing out Mist.

“Alexandria is almost completely restored to its former glory,” began Queen Garnet. “With the gracious cooperation of friends old and new, we have all but made the country shimmer with

brilliance. As for the Mist and the monsters it produced, I must extend my heartfelt appreciation to Captains Steiner and Beatrix, who are absent from this meeting, as well as sir Tribal. Without their constant efforts, Alexandria might not have the peace it so desperately needs.” With that, Garnet smiled politely and returned to her seat, giving Zidane a brief smile. He winked at her and held onto her hand.

“Those responsible for manufacturing the black mages are being dealt with accordingly,” said Mayor Huffle of Dali. “As for the machines themselves, we are still debating whether or not to keep them up and running. If Mist can be recycled into a black mage, then we may still have a use for it.”

“I’m not so sure that’s such a good idea,” spoke Number 266. “I mean, I’m grateful for the new black mages we’ve been receiving, but what if they become mavericks like the original models? Or worse, what if there appears more Black Waltzes?” Number 266 paused, and gazed at Huffle with empty yellow eyes.

“Then again,” replied Huffle, “there might be another Vivi in the mix. Even victims of black mage

attacks admired master Vivi. He was, after all, a hero of the war.”

“Agreed,” replied Number 266. He paused, and turned to Regent Cid. “I apologize for interrupting, sir.” Cid grunted and waved it off.

“No, that’s okay. Feel free to speak your mind. After all, we’re all friends here, right?”

“Ah sure do hope so!” barked Chief Ghiot of the dwarves. “Dunno if’n ah kin trust alf’ the people ootside’a this buildin’.”

“Trusting each other will become the key to cooperation,” noted Bishop Benedic. The dwarf Chief growled happily and gave a “Rally-ho!”

“Ah dunna disagree with ya there, yir eminence,” he said. “An’ never was a wiser word spaken! But, ah’m jus’ warnin’ ye. Some people canna be trusted.”

“In any case,” coughed Regent Cid, trying to change the subject, “I’d like to hear everyone else’s reports, please.” The councilors apologized, and one by one, they began reading off the conditions of their individual towns.

Hilda Falbool, elegant and regal and perhaps a little more mature than her husband, represented her country that day. She stated that all of Lindblum had been recovering nicely since the terrible attack from Atomos. In fact, she noted, almost all repairs were already done. The theater district was up and running again, and even the Festival of the Hunt was taking place.

Quale of the Qu marshes, as always, had nothing but peace and prosperity to give. Even though his people's lands had declared neutrality in all political arenas, his voice was still valuable to the other councilors. With Qu marshes stationed around the world, it was important to know exactly what was going on and where, and Quale's eyes and ears proved invaluable. Needless to say, Mist monsters were at their usual consistency around the marshes.

Queen Stella of Treno, midway between her speech on Stellazzo artifacts and comments on the weather, had little to say for her Treno. Another city that had declared neutrality, Treno had been virtually unaffected by the battle against Kuja and Terra. But being the center for commerce and arts, Treno was still an important pillar in the Parthenon that was the Council of Gaia. Mist monsters around Treno were becoming rare, thankfully.

Chief Ghiot of Conde Petie, in his usual bullish fashion, declared that the area surrounding his domain was completely freed from Mist. With the aid of the black mages and the Genomes, Ghiot's dwarves had made a sport of exterminating Mist monsters. Their handicraft had become invaluable once rebuilding efforts went underway, and many dwarves now frequented Lindblum, Alexandria, and even Burmecia.

Eiko Carol and her moogles' entourage also declared safety from Mist and the monsters it spawned. Since their village was so close to the Iifa Tree, it was a surprise to discover how lax the monsters were, but Eiko assured the council that all evil and/or foreign matters were dealt with by the spirits of summoners long gone.

As his eminence stated before, there was literally no activity surrounding the Shimmering Isles. Formerly the nexus between Terra and Gaia, the Shimmering Isles had once been the central coordinate for all Mist-related activity. To say that the area was now completely safe and pure was a very good sign of progress.

Finally, Elder Vanderhaum of Daguerro also reported good news. Mist had all but vanished from

the shores of the small city, and other than local gossip and the occasional explorer or scholar visiting, there was absolutely no news to present from his area.

Satisfied by the results, Regent Cid thus called the meeting to an early end, and expected all participants to meet again in two month's time, unless otherwise notified. The assembly then left the council room and Lindblum Grand Castle itself, and each returned to their own lodge to rest for the day. Zidane, naturally, had had enough rest in the meeting.

“Sorry, Dagge—ehh, Garnet,” he shrugged. Garnet placed her hands on her hips and glared at the young man, though she could not hide the love she bore him.

“Honestly Zidane, you could at least *pretend* to stay awake. I know that hearing about how every city and town in the world is getting to be tiresome, but it is important that we keep track of our world. Why, who knows what could crop up in the next two months?”

“Probably the Elder of Daguerro buying a new pair of shoes,” he sighed. Garnet clicked her tongue,

and shook her head. Gorgeous black hair flowed like wheat as it waved.

“I’m serious,” she said softly. “You know that we have to keep on our toes. This world council idea was an incredible one, and I owe you and Steiner and everyone else so much for it. So please, Zidane... Please try to at least feign interest. I mean, I have to have somebody attend as part of my entourage, and Steiner and Beatrix would usually come, but today they had other matters.”

“Yeah, like that date that ‘somebody’ set them up on,” replied the boy, never missing a beat. Garnet’s face soon turned to the color of another jewel, but she had to admit that she was part of the “problem”.

“Okay, so I was partially to blame. But, well... I wanted you by my side...” Zidane smiled warmly and approached his princess, eyes twinkling with love.

“Aww, you’re so sweet...” Garnet chuckled, and her face kept its ruby hue as he leaned closer... Closer... closer still.....

“Excellency! All perimeters have been checked!!” Garnet nearly leaped out of her skin as she heard the bellow of the Captain of the Pluto

knights. Still flushed slightly, she turned around and awkwardly thanked him.

“Ah, um...”

“Oh, pardon me,” muttered Steiner humbly, kneeling to the ground. “I, ah, did not mean to intrude...”

“Adelbert Steiner! How many times do you have to be told?! *Always knock when you enter a lady’s room!*” Steiner flinched and turned an ashy color as the sound of Beatrix’s pretty voice bellowed across the hall. The aforementioned knight broke into the room, an enraged look on her face. She suddenly jumped as she realized just what Steiner had interrupted.

“Ah, oh, your majesty!” Beatrix kneeled, and pulled the loveable Steiner down to the floor with her.

“Uh, hey guys,” said Zidane. “So, uh, how was the date?”

The looks that Zidane received that day would have melted the frozen wastelands that Bishop Benedic called home.

One week passed since the Council of Gaia disbanded. With an optimistic disposition and good things to report, things looked like they were picking up once again. The damage caused by Kuja and Garland had all but been erased, and only a few minor details were left to clean up.

Still, even after a week passed, Garnet could not help but think of Burmecia's absence in the meeting. To be sure, her uncle Cid was correct when he said that not all members needed to be there, and perhaps there was nothing to worry about. After all, Chief Ghiott had been late to meetings before, and then there was the trouble caused by Number 288's "stopping".

But Garnet still had a look of concern as she went about her daily routines. Burmecia and Cleyra had been hit awfully hard during the struggles, and though Cleyra was a lost cause, Burmecia had been slowly healing its wounds over the months. Given time, it would probably resurface into the mighty and proud nation that it used to be. Perhaps Cid was right, after all. Maybe it was nothing.

Besides, Garnet had other things to worry about. Keeping Zidane in line was her biggest concern; keeping him from flirting around was even more

troublesome. Garnet knew full well that the boy loved her, but he could be so impossible sometimes. On the other hand, she *had* been receiving lots of marriage proposals within the previous year, none of which were too unappetizing. She even considered a few—just to spite Zidane, of course.

One of Garnet's more immediate concerns was what to have for lunch. Her friend and personal chef, Quina Quan, had returned to the position as head cook of Alexandria after the fight with Kuja, and the meals that s/he made were becoming famous. Quina, somebody from the same clan as Quale, was a renowned chef of the kingdom whose specialty was frog soup and oglop pie (which was actually quite delicious if one ignored the occasional shell).

Garnet felt like not eating anything exotic that day—something simpler was her desire. Having a personal chef on call had many advantages, and having a chef that loved to cook was even better. Quina was never bothered by harsh criticism—if somebody didn't like the food, Quina would just smile and slurp it up for them.

Steiner's Gysahl pickle diet was becoming a thorn in Garnet's side, even though she had to admit that they were good. Beatrix, in an even more

unusual twist, had become addicted to the strange new food that one of the Vivis had “invented” one day. While chasing a pigeon, one of the Vivis accidentally knocked a canister of tomato paste and some grated cheese onto a piece of dough that was supposed to be flatbread. What came out was a combination that nobody seemed to get enough of, least of all Beatrix.

As Garnet asked for her daily lunch, the General herself could be seen strolling around, stuffing a slice of the tomato-bread-cheese mixture in her mouth. Steiner, ever bubbling with the occasional idea, had topped pickles onto his pie. The idea was a flop, but soon people began copying him and slamming all kinds of weird foodstuffs on the edible invention. Zidane revolutionized the exploding franchise by adding slices of sausage and pepperoni onto the pies.

“Oh, Beatrix!” The General turned her head to the Queen, and rushed forward as fast as she could. Garnet snickered politely and made a wiping motion with her hand. Beatrix’s face turned as red as the sauce that had spilled on her cheeks, and in a flash the paste was gone.

“Yes, highness!” she saluted. Garnet still had that smile by the time she addressed her bodyguard.

“At ease, Beatrix. I’m just wondering if you’d like to join me for lunch.”

“Ah, highness, I would be honored to...” managed the knight. “But regretfully, I have already eaten, as you see.” Garnet resumed snickering.

“Yes, I did see.” Beatrix smiled meekly, and tried turning her reddened face away from her liege. *Queen Garnet is so kind, she thought to herself. Brahne would have my head if she saw me make a mess like this!*

“Well,” continued the Queen, “thank you anyway. Enjoy your last piece of... whatever that is.”

“It’s a ‘piece’a’, as sir Zidane calls it.”

“A piece of what?”

“No, no... a *piece’a*. Leave it to Zidane to come up with an annoying name like that. Keeps you wondering what in Hades it is.”

“Hm, a... *piece’a*, eh?” mused Garnet. She smiled, and nodded her head. “I like it. All right, I’ll name it a ‘piecea’.” The two ladies smiled, and

Beatrix excused herself just long enough to retrieve a napkin.

The alleys echoed with the unmistakable sound of approaching footsteps. Slower and closer came the stomping sound of boots, slowly, closer, like a metronome. Jacques B. Nymbull (Master Thief Extraordinaire) stood behind a wall, clutching his knife in glee as he heard the sound of feet clapping against cobblestone. They were getting closer, very close, and soon the hapless victim would be penniless.

As the sound came within close quarters, Jacques screamed and leaped out of his hiding place, aiming the knife at the intended victim. With a demand of “Your money or your life!”, Jacques was sure that his quota would be met.

Unfortunately, for him that is, the man did not move an inch. He merely crossed his arms, staring down at the thief before him. Jacques stuttered as he saw the man, and his mouth hung open like a cave. Indecipherable words choked out of his mouth, and a squeal of helplessness came from his voice.

“Yuh... yuh... yuh...” he pointed, stuttering wildly. “Yuh... you’re... you’re... the... the... the...”

“Yep,” replied the man. Jacques practically swallowed his Adam’s Apple in fear.

“You’re the... the... the... Flaming... the... the Flaming...”

“Yup,” said the man. Jacques squealed in agony, and dropped the knife as he looked into the shaggy red hair of the Flaming Amarant. The great monk took one single threatening step, grabbed Jacques by the head, turned him upside down, and shook him until all his treasures spilled out. With a toss, the Flaming Amarant heaved the thief away, leaving him alive though thoroughly bruised from the collision on the road. Jacques finally screamed, and ran away as fast as he could, swearing to amend his ways if he lived to tell the tale.

“Fool,” said Amarant blankly, bending down to pick up the coins. He didn’t even bother noticing the local police approaching him.

“What’s the deal?” asked an officer, spying a tall red-headed man gather coins from the street. If anything was more suspicious, he hadn’t seen it yet.

“Robber,” said Amarant, pointing his thumb to his back. The police gave him a suspicious look, and the Flaming one sighed in annoyance. “I mugged the

mugger,” he elaborated, but this did little to please the authorities.

“You look suspicious,” said an officer, slowly approaching the man. Amarant shook his head in disbelief. All of this was just a waste of his time.

“Looks can be very deceiving,” he said, “but they can also be very true.”

“Now just what does that mean?” demanded the officer, twirling his Billy club in the air. Amarant groaned, and began walking away as if he saw this sort of trouble every day. Needless to say, somebody tried to stop him.

“Hold it! You’re a suspect!” cried the officer. Amarant sighed, wishing very much to shred at them with his claws, but continued walking as if he had all day.

“STOP!! ROBBER!!!” cried the police. Amarant let out a chuckle as they accused him, and made it a note to make them swallow their words later on. Since time immemorial, everyone had accused him of everything, from burglary to assassination and from theft to arson—but then again, most of those accusations were dead on, so to speak.

A familiar face stopped the police, but no mortal being could stop Amarant's walk.

"Three minutes in here and you're already in trouble!" shouted the person. He smiled, and shooed the guards away. The young man gave Amarant a smile and a wave, but the older one merely crossed his arms.

"Got held up," he said coolly. Zidane smiled and mimed Amarant's posture.

"Sure." The Flaming one snorted, and quietly walked towards the boat docks. Zidane called for him, and gave chase. 'Now hold on!' he said. "Where do you think you're going?"

"There," said Amarant, pointing to the castle. Zidane scratched his head, but had to run in order to catch up to the taller man. Leaping onto the boat, the sunny boy with a tail joined his one-time comrade.

"So what's up?" asked Zidane, surprised that Amarant hadn't pushed him in the water yet. The Flaming one snorted and crossed his arms.

"I need to deliver a message," he replied.

"Oh." A pause. "What kind of message?"

“For her majesty’s ears only,” he informed. Zidane let out a weak curse and kicked the boat.

“Come on,” he whined, “you can tell me! We’re old chums!”

“Garnet only,” repeated Amarant, his voice no higher or lower than usual. Zidane growled softly, but decided to sit on the boat instead of argue.

“What if I told you that I married Garnet and became king?” he asked. Amarant snorted lightly.

“Don’t make me laugh.”

“Trust me, I wouldn’t,” mumbled Zidane, and for the rest of the trip to the castle, neither man spoke a word.

Amarant left as silently as he came, but Zidane would have none of it. The sprightly young Genome followed the fiery man up until they arrived at the castle gates, wherein the guards promptly stopped them. Without a word, Amarant showed them a piece of cloth parchment, and was let by without any hassle. Zidane was not so lucky, and was forced to sit outside in wait.

Amarant made his way up to the royal balcony once inside. He had been there before, with Lani, so

he knew the layout well. While he walked up the stairs that led from the grand chamber to the upper rooms, he was stopped by two persistent bodyguards.

“The Queen is having her lunch!” barked Steiner, barring the door with his arm. Beatrix was somewhat less pushy.

“What do you need?” she asked, and Amarant showed the guards the parchment he was carrying. Even block-headed Steiner recognized the marking, and he let the Flaming one through without hesitation. True, Steiner trusted Amarant like he trusted Quina with a disabled frog, but the seal on the parchment he had carried was more than enough to convince him.

“Garnet,” said Amarant, startling the Queen. She nearly choked on her soup, and had to pound on her chest to stop coughing.

“What the? Who dares?” she demanded. Amarant shook his head and showed her the parchment he had carried. The Queen’s anger faded like ice in the desert, and a solemn look overcame her.

“I apologize,” she said, noticing the seal of Cid Falbool. “And I welcome you back to Alexandria,

Salamander.” Amarant shrugged as she mentioned his real name, and crossed his arms as usual.

“Got a message for you,” he said. Garnet nodded her head, immediately sensing the urgency of the situation. If her uncle Cid had sent Amarant, of all people, to Alexandria with his own personal seal, then there must’ve been something amiss.

“Go ahead, I’m listening,” she said. Amarant, never one to beat around the bush, laid it out for her cold turkey.

“Monsters are attacking Mognet Central,” he said blankly. His reaction might not have been noticeable, but Garnet’s sharp gasp and mask of concern certainly was. Never once did she doubt the Flaming one. He may have been a high-class criminal, but Amarant was never a liar. Still...

“Are you sure?” she asked. Amarant nodded his head.

“I saw them myself. I would have fought them, but that’s not what I was paid for.”

“Oh.” A pause. Garnet swallowed, her young mind racing for ideas. If Mognet Central was under attack, then communication between nations would be completely cut off. There would be no letters of

request from any nation, no notes indicating an invasion, no word from foreign dignitaries, and certainly no civilian communication. Whoever was behind this was a clever creature.

“I guess that explains why we have heard nothing from Burmecia,” she surmised. The excuse was sound and quite logical; of course, it made sense now. The Burmecian King must’ve hit some trouble on the way to Alexandria, and Mognet Central was under attack during that time, so of course there was no word from him.

“That’s all,” said Amarant, stepping towards the balcony. He almost leaped off.

“Wait!”

“I suggest you send some troops over,” said Amarant before he jumped. Garnet sighed, and knew that the mercenary was right. Finishing her meal, Garnet put her bowl away and knocked on the wooden doors.

“Beatrix? Steiner? I need to have a word with you.”

Alone save for Erin and a few other nameless pilots, Beatrix and Steiner stood aboard the Hilda Guard 3, the wind flapping against their bodies softly. They watched as the landscape transformed from the kingdom of Alexandria into the wilderness beyond it, and finally, the great wide ocean. One hectic day had passed.

“What do you request of us, highness?” Garnet sighed, and closed her eyes in concentration. Just take it one step at a time, she told herself.

“Captain Steiner, General Beatrix, I have some bad news to tell you.”

“Peace is never permanent,” noted the General. “But our swords are yours.” Garnet nodded her head, and prepared to give the dreaded info away.

“I have just received word from a reliable source that Mognet Central is under attack,” she said. Steiner grunted, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

“How horrible!” he stated. “But, that means that all communication between the nations would be cut off! All sorts of havoc could be wreaked!”

“Yes, I know,” said Garnet softly. “Whatever is responsible for this attack is a very crafty adversary. I want somebody I trust to investigate, but I don’t want to send an all-out army. I mean, it could just be a couple of Malboros...” Mentally, Garnet kicked herself for the foolish thought. Yeah, right. Uncle Cid would never send Amarant here if that were the case. He must have been.....desperate...

“Whew, finally out of Alexandria!” whistled Erin. Saluting boldly, she turned to Steiner and gave him a smile. “Captain! We’ll be approaching the Forgotten Continent in about two hours! Mognet Central is only a stone’s throw away from there!”

“Thank you, commander,” nodded the knight. Erin smiled and placed her hands behind her back.

“Call me Erin, *Adelbert*! We’re old friends, right?” The knight paused, and coughed just enough times to hide a flushed face.

“Hrum, yes. I, uh, apologize, Erin.” She smiled, and continued to monitor the airship like a good commander should. Beatrix, who was trying to get some rest in the cabins, couldn’t help but feel a little woozy.

“That Cid...” she groaned, feeling the bump of turbulence shake her out of the bed. “The Regent may be the Queen’s adopted uncle and the Regent of Lindblum, but still...” She suddenly hiccupped, and held her mouth desperately as the vessel lurched. Her deceptively-pretty face began to turn colors that were foreign to her as the airship rocked, but all Beatrix could do was sit in her bed and try to rest. Steiner, she assumed, was used to riding in the Hilda Guard, and would be unaffected (of course, anyone who could stand the smell of Gysahl pickles had to have an iron stomach).

“I asked of your help because you two are the finest knights in all of Alexandria,” continued the Queen. Steiner and Beatrix smiled shyly, and managed to hide a blush. “Besides, I would trust each of you with my soul. I know that this matter will be taken care of if I ask the two of you to attend.”

“Your excellency, waste not such kind words on us!” boomed Steiner, kneeling on the floor. Beatrix took the compliments a little more conservatively.

“I am happy of your confidence with us,” she stated, covering her heart with her fist. “If it pleases you, we should like to depart as soon as possible.”

“Of course!” exclaimed the Queen. “The sooner the better! I would like this matter solved by next week, if possible!”

“It shall be done, majesty!” boomed Steiner, giving his most impressive salute. Garnet mimed their smiles, bowed her head, and wished them good luck.

“Miss Erin, I will be going to the mess hall for a brief supper!” announced Steiner. Erin giggled softly, and told the big guy that he didn’t need to tell her of every little thing he was doing. Adamant Steiner insisted that, should he be needed, his locality would have to be known at all times. Erin let him go, assuring him that she could find him easily. Of course, Steiner didn’t grasp what she meant (a blind man with no legs could find Steiner in a wide open meadow without much effort), but saluted as always and left her.

Steiner was alone in the mess hall, which meant of course that he needed to make his own meals. The

noble knight knew how to eat well enough, but on matters of cooking, he was a flop. Previously, Quina had supplied Adelbert with the necessary meals, but the gluttonous Qu was miles away, probably chasing one of the multiple Vivis around with a gigantic ladle.

Humming a stirring marching tune, Steiner managed to find an unopened can of chicken noodle soup. Figuring that there was no way that he could mess this simple feast up, Steiner opened the can and poured the soup into a bowl. One eager spoon traveled between the food and Steiner's mouth like a bee to a flower.

"Grrr... I... have... had... worse," managed the knight. Steiner grimaced and managed to swallow the food. It tasted... well, it was safe to say that Steiner had never tasted anything like it, nor would he ever forget it either. As he forced a second spoonful down, one of the navigators entered the room and joined him.

"Oh, hey Captain," he saluted. "Just looking for some flour. Whatcha eatin', soup?"

"Yes, though it's a strange taste," mumbled Steiner, wincing slightly. The navigator tried a spoonful, and nearly spat the stuff out in disgust.

“Uh, you must have a mighty constitution,” he grunted. Steiner gazed at the navigator questionably.

“Why?”

“Uh, maybe you don’t know this,” said the man weakly, “but soup usually needs to be *heated* before being served.”

“...So will you help us?” Hilda Falbool smiled, and nodded her head without hesitation.

“Anything for dear darling Garnet,” she said. “You need an airship, right?”

“That is correct, Madame,” saluted Steiner. Hilda smiled again.

“I suppose you can use his Number Three,” she said, pointing to a mighty vessel parked somewhere inside the Grand Castle docks. “Sugar cup isn’t using it anyway.”

“Is it really okay if we use the Hilda Guard?” asked Beatrix. “I mean, shouldn’t we alert Cid first?”

“(Frankly dear,)” whispered Hilda, “(the poor dope wouldn’t miss it a bit. In fact, you could keep it to yourselves and he’d never notice. You know Cid; as soon as he makes the ultimate toy, he’s got to make a bigger and better version. I mean, why else do you think he made three Hilda Guardes?)”

“I... see,” chuckled Beatrix. “Well then, if we have your permission, then I suppose that it’s okay.”

“Certainly! Oh, and I know you won’t need it, but good luck!”

“Thank you, Madame!” saluted Steiner. The two knights bowed, then rushed off to board the Hilda Guard 3. Hilda herself waved them good-bye.

“Darling?” came a familiar voice from behind. Hilda turned and greeted her husband.

“Yes, dear?”

“Who was that?”

“Just Lady Beatrix and Sir Steiner.” A pause.

“Oh. Were they headed towards Mognet Central, by any chance?”

“Why yes, they were! How did you know?” Cid grinned, and performed a victory dance.

“Ha! It’s my business to know these things! So I assume that you loaned them one of my finest vessels?!”

“Of course, dear,” she replied. “I let them have your #3 and all crew and personnel aboard.” At this revelation, Cid moaned out painfully, and hung his head at the loss of his prized vessel. Hilda sighed, and hugged him close as she comforted him.

“Cheer up now,” she said. “There’ll always be #4.”

“Ack, you’re right,” grumbled Cid. He regained his poise and raised his fist in the air. “The Hilda Guard 4 will be the mightiest vessel in the world!!

Here we go again, sighed Lady Hilda to herself.

Beatrix couldn’t help but smile as she heard the familiar *clank-clank* sound of Steiner’s armor. The loveable old goof was heading towards his own rest quarters, looking tired and somewhat sick. Beatrix half-smiled as she saw him, and hoped that whatever was afflicting him, it would vanish quickly. Besides, he needed to be in top condition for whatever awaited them at Mognet Central...

“My lady!” came a voice. Beatrix, who was already sitting up, turned her head to see who had called. It was Commander Erin, the pilot of the ship.

“Enter,” beckoned the General. Erin scurried in as ordered, and hastily shut the door. Beatrix, who could practically smell the other woman’s zesty enthusiasm, groaned softly and laid back in her bed.

“I know something,” boasted the commander. Beatrix frowned, not feeling too excited over the prospect. Even so, she decided to humor Erin. She was as bored as all get-out, and was completely unable to sleep.

“Like?” she said. Erin’s smile increased a centimeter in length as her feet rocked.

“Why you and Captain Steiner were *really* asked to go on this mission!” Beatrix sighed at how easily her predictions came true sometimes. This was, of course, not the time for girlish games. But Beatrix was so restless she could have died.

“Really?” she mumbled, sounding as interested as a fickle child. “Do tell.”

“Well, since you two make such a good couple
—”

Oh, God, please say it's not what I think it is...

“—I think the Queen put you on this mission so you could, you know, come together.”

I will kill her, thought the General bitterly. *As God as my witness, I will literally kill her as she stands. Where's Save the Queen?*

“Is that a fact?” muttered Beatrix, feigning interest. Erin, poor dear sweet loveable Erin, did not hear the exasperation seeping in the General's voice.

“Just a thought, of course,” continued Erin. “Just a thought, between us girls.”

Now I really will kill her. Shoot, I can't believe I put Save the Queen somewhere else...

“Well, thanks for the, uh, *thought*,” said Beatrix dryly. Erin smiled and saluted, then suddenly, her disposition did a 180.

“You worried? About this new attack? I mean, Mognet Central being hit is big news...”

Urge to kill... fading...

“I'm more worried about who's piloting the Hilda,” said Beatrix emptily. Erin literally giggled and tried to hide a crimson face.

“Boyd’s taking care of it,” she managed. Beatrix, though she was in somewhat of a bad mood, couldn’t help but smile as she heard the squeal. Good old Boyd and Erin were quickly becoming an item—apparently, that other guy (*What’s his name?* thought the General) was no longer in the picture. Beatrix couldn’t remember the guy’s name for the life of her.

“All right. Uh, Erin, if you don’t mind, I’d like to have a little privacy.”

“Oh, of course!” gasped Erin. She bowed as low as she could, and scampered outside of the room. Dear sweet Beatrix was questioning the point of the visit, and why Erin seemed bubblier than usual. *Oh well*, she thought. *Sometimes, people just do things.*

“*Ready for liftoff whenever you are, Captain!*” Steiner smiled, placing his hands on his hips in approval.

“*Thank God!*” he beamed. “*Beatrix, it seems as if a twist of fortune has placed us in the capable hands of Sailor Erin! I know we can rely on her. She is quite possibly one of the best pilots I know of!*”

“Aw, shucks,” chuckled Erin, “I’m nothing special. Oh, and uh, I moved up in rank. I’m a ‘commander’ now, but please just call me Erin!” Beatrix smiled, or at least she looked like she did, and stepped up to salute the commander.

“Have you been informed of our mission?” she asked. Erin gave a crisp military salute.

“Of course!” she squealed. “I mean, it’s not like there’s anybody that doesn’t know what’s going on.”

“I see...” Beatrix paused, just long enough to spy Steiner giving orders to some low-ranking navigators. She smiled as she watched him, even though his voice was loud and somewhat obnoxious. Nobody’s perfect, she reasoned, so why should I expect him to be so?

“Oh, General?” piped Erin. “We’re ready to leave for Mognet Central whenever you are!”

“Ah, good!” smiled Beatrix, and the grin was a genuine one this time. “The sooner we get there, the faster we can solve this little crisis!” Erin smiled and nodded, and Beatrix boarded the ship along with Steiner and the navigators. A foreign face which she didn’t recognize was at the copilot’s wheel.

“Sup, Lady B?” he hooted. Beatrix froze, gaping at the sudden rudeness in shock.

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, you’ll have to forgive Boyd!” gushed Erin. “He’s as impolite as a bear during dinnertime, but you’ll grow to love him!” No thanks, muttered the General. She kept her serious face and nodded at the copilot. Erin, on the other hand, snuck a kiss (or at least she thought it had been snuck).

“Estimated time before arrival?” asked Steiner. Boyd saluted boldly.

“Just a few more minutes, Cap’n A.S.”

“Wh-what?! Captain *what?!?*”

“Erm...” Boyd stuttered, seeing the angry look on Steiner’s fuming face. He quickly apologized as he saw the knight graze his finger against the hilt of his blade. Steiner frowned and nodded triumphantly; Beatrix, who had seen the whole spectacle, couldn’t help but grin.

Erin let out a gusty sigh of relief as the Hilda Guarde 3 landed on the tiny island that contained Mognet Central. Smiling like an idiot, she turned around and saluted her passengers.

“Captain Steiner, General Beatrix, we have arrived at Mognet Central!”

“Excellent!” beamed Steiner. “And in record time! Thank you, commander!” Erin managed to keep half her smile as he saluted her; the other half had been lost when he refused to address her informally. *Some people just never change*, thought the pilot.

“Yes, thank you, Erin,” said Beatrix. “Now if you’ll excuse us, we have some work to do. Please find somewhere safe to hide, and make sure that nothing comes and destroys the Hilda.”

“Roger!” saluted Erin. She immediately scampered back inside the Hilda, and posted several navigators and maintenance workers as lookouts. Steiner and Beatrix gave each other a glance, nodded, and turned towards the cave that held the communications capitol of the world.

Somewhat warm for a land so far up north, Mognet Central was home to at least a dozen of the

short, furry, adorable creatures. Its main purpose was receiving and delivering mail via the moogles, but it also had a newspaper in print and even a magazine. If something could survive the swim across the icy oceans, or the flight through biting winds, and if this something could pull off an invasion in such harsh climates, then the matter had to be taken seriously.

A terrifying monster was guarding the front entrance, something that resembled a scorpion—only about four meters larger. The immense creature looked as mean as it was big, and equally dangerous. Two shredding claws snapped as the knights approached it, and a venomous tail swung back and forth like a giant's mace. Both Steiner and Beatrix had fought many similar monsters during Kuja's raid on Alexandria, so they were old pros by now.

Without wasting any time, Beatrix swung Save the Queen at the monster and nearly cut its face in half. The creature was quick, but then again, it *was* a scorpion. Unfortunately, it was fighting up against two of the finest knights in the kingdom, so it would have to be a lot quicker if it desired life.

Steiner dashed in from the side as Beatrix swiped at the creature, and rammed his blade into the monster's abdomen. The mighty blade, won from a

battle with the devil himself, was so sharp it cleaved through the scorpion's exoskeleton like it was made out of butter. The creature gave a groan and quickly turned around, its claws snapping. Steiner was knocked a good distance away by the pincer, but bounced back a minute later.

Beatrix, meanwhile, waited for the creature to turn around before jamming her own weapon into its side. The scorpion howled as a second sword kissed its innards, but Beatrix was lighter than Steiner and thus avoided the claw it swung at her. The poison-tipped tail then decided to go for it, and with a lurch, the scorpion poked at the knights with the venom. It bumped up against Beatrix, just barely causing a slight cut in her hand. The General moaned out in agony as the poison slowly seeped into her blood, but vowed retribution for the strike. Summoning her energy, Beatrix dashed forward and performed a Climhazzard on the beast. The mighty monster groaned in misery, and died on the spot as its life faded.

“Wretched creature,” snorted Steiner, dusting himself off. He noticed Beatrix's weakness, and dashed forward with an antidote. Before spewing out what little lunch she had eaten, the knight drank the liquid and was healed before she could blink.

“Thanks,” she managed. Steiner beamed proudly and placed his hands on his hips.

“A petty guardian!” he stated. “Come! There are worthier foes within!” With a nod, Beatrix joined her comrade in storming into Mognet. Two well-timed tackles jarred the door loose, and a few kicks broke it open.

Both knights let out the same curse word at the same time as they saw what horrors had befallen the postal service. All around the room, there were hundreds of demonic creatures, some of which even Steiner could not identify. Bats, goblins, Marlboros, chimeras, kraken, and hydra were strewn about like so much confetti, and an enormous fiend that appeared to be the leader sat in the center of it all.

This monster who was organizing the others was a being long-thought a myth in Gaia. It was enormous in stature, larger than Amarant and Steiner combined. It had muscles the size of Quina’s body, and a great massive horn protruding out from its head. It almost looked human, and save for the single eye centering its head, it might have been one.

“A Cyclops!” hissed Beatrix. She growled fiercely, though anyone who knew her well enough

could tell that there was fear in her glare. “It seems as if they are not a myth!”

“They soon will be!” cried Steiner, pointing Excalibur II at the monster. A multitude of moogles, who were being tortured by the Cyclops and his cronies, squeaked out in terror as they saw the knights. A few of the more fortunate ones scampered towards the duo in fear.

“Kupo! Kupo!! Kupo!” squealed a moogle. Steiner, who was somewhat fluent in the moogle’s language, rubbed his chin in thought.

“Egad!” he exclaimed. “They’ve really been here that long?”

“Kupo! Kupo kupo!! Kupoppoppo!”

“Yes, we are here to help!” he stated, waving his sword bravely. ‘But I suggest you round everybody up and leave! We shall take care of everything else, so go find a place of safety!’ The moogle nodded his head, and squeaked out a long string of frantic “Kupo!” phrased to his friends. The other moogles nodded their heads, and scurried away into the cold but safe regions of the outer world.

“I didn’t know that you spoke Moogle!” said Beatrix. Steiner coughed and tried to keep his

humility.

“Yes, well, being in the company of so many leaves an impression on you!” She smiled, just faintly, but remembered why they were there in the first place. With a cry, the two Alexandrians rushed forth into the mess of beasts, cutting and hacking away at anything that moved.

Erin moaned out a horribly long and somewhat painful yawn as she stretched. Smacking her lips, she scratched a random body part and tried to stay awake. With the exception of a few birds pecking around, there was nothing of interest on the island. Erin was quickly becoming restless, and was so bored that she was becoming numb. She realized that Beatrix had trusted her with watching over the Hilda, but from what? The pilot sighed, wondering what in Gaia would be stupid enough to travel all this way just to attack the airship.

With a sharp choking sound, Erin nearly fell out of her seat as a swarm of moogles poured out of the cave. She let out a cry, and dashed down to the surface as quickly as possible. Amidst the echoing chorus of “Kupo, kupo!”, her voice was lost.

“Calm down, now!” she said. “Don’t talk so much! I can’t understand you!”

“Kupo kupo!” wheezed a moogle, pointing to the airship. Erin frowned and tried to interpret its charades.

“You want to hide on the airship?” she guessed. The moogles, who for some reason could understand human speech, nodded their white heads in unison. Erin let out a sigh, and allowed the creatures to board. If anything, she noted, they would have been a relief from the boredom she had been subjected to.

“Hey! Hey-hey-hey!!” A snazzy voice erupted out of the group, and Erin turned around to see a rare purple moogle flap over to her direction. Racking her brain, she tried in vain to remember its name.

“Artemis, right?” she guessed.

“No, no, Artemecion!” it replied. Erin sighed, finally glad to encounter a moogle she could understand.

“I’m so relieved!” she exclaimed. “I can’t understand a single word those others were saying!”

“They were just looking for shelter, kupo,” replied the violet moogle. “Those two Alexandrian knights have already made it inside. Kupo, that place isn’t safe for moogles anymore.”

“I guess it wouldn’t be,” shrugged Erin. “So do you have any orders from the General?”

“No,” replied Artemecion, “but I’m pretty sure that they won’t be able to handle all those monsters themselves. You should help them, kupo.”

“They’ll get mad if I do,” insisted Erin sadly. “They told me to stand guard here.”

“Aw, don’t worry,” sniffed the moogle. “We can handle that. Just bring your finest fighters, kupo, and be careful.” Erin nodded and gave her most impressive salute, and rushed back to the ship to gather some help. Pilots and fighters were usually not made from the same mold, but there were exceptions, and a few of those exceptions had been accompanying Erin as she guided the knights to their destination.

Rushing back to the ship, she caught Boyd and a few others in a game of poker. With a shout, their commander snapped them out of their game and explained the situation. Eager to stay on Erin’s good side, the crew gave a salute and quickly gathered together some weapons and armor. Boyd, as always, stayed by Erin’s side.

“So, like, is it really dangerous in there?” he said. Erin shrugged.

“I dunno. I guess so. If Beatrix and Steiner are in there, then we shouldn’t worry too much. But Artemecion’s right—they won’t last long if it’s just them.”

“Huh? Who’s Artemecion?”

“Some moogle,” shrugged Erin. She smiled, and tapped her boyfriend on his shoulder. “Come on! I’m gonna need your help too, Boyd!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Only slightly out of breath, Steiner yanked his blade out of the hydra’s body. Normal weapons wouldn’t have been able to pierce its skin, and specially-designed tools would have been eaten away by its acidic blood. But Excalibur II was a sacred weapon; not even an Ultima spell would have broken its invincible blade.

But Steiner did not gloat for long, for his beloved weapon was already slashing at a bat that had flown towards him. The creature, both halves of it, fell to the ground as it rushed towards him. Adelbert did not even get a chance to smile as he dashed himself against his next opponent, a Marlboro...

The enemies inside Mognet Central were easily taken care of, but there were so many of them that it felt like running a marathon. Both knights had become accustomed to fighting multiple battles, so they easily cleaved through the first few waves of attackers. Moogles became liberated from their prison as the knights fought onward, and the ground became painted with blood and intestines.

But the legion of demonic creatures were wearing them down slowly. Already, Steiner had a few bruises on his body despite the armor he wore, and Beatrix had been cut on several spots. These wounds seemed insignificant, however, when compared to the dozens of carcasses who were strewn around the cave.

With a grunt, Beatrix dug her blade into the leg of the Cyclops, becoming only slightly disgusted as she ripped through muscle and flesh. The one-eyed brute groaned out in pain, and smashed its mammoth fists at the General. Far smaller and nimbler, the lady avoided the raining fists like a mouse avoids the paw of a cat. When she could, Beatrix would sneak in a little slice here and there, but the Cyclops would never give her a good opening.

Steiner, noble Steiner, was performing well by keeping the monsters off of his comrade's back. Beatrix had already been attacked by a harpy while she fought the Cyclops, and Steiner swore then that he would let no other creature interfere. Beatrix smiled warmly as he vowed to protect her, but the big lug never saw it, as he was too busy killing things.

Suddenly, there came a shout from the door. Both knights foolishly broke their concentrations to see what the commotion was, and each got a pummeling from the Cyclops in return. Oblivious to the pain that they had already caused, Erin and her crew rushed into the cave, wielding weapons of crude nature.

Still, the distraction proved successful. With a fresh batch of new "fighters", the enemies were now faced with many more opponents to shred. Boyd was perhaps the only foe among them who genuinely posed a threat; his skills with Tonfa were exceptional. Erin wielded a pair of sais as she stormed into the cave; everyone else carried makeshift swords and clubs.

Groaning from the hurt she had received, Beatrix growled in fury as she saw the tiny army wipe out

the monsters. For sure, she was relieved that there were a few less foes to fight now, but Erin had been given explicit orders to stand by and guard the airship. Why she felt the need to breach an order was unknown.

Roaring a little, Beatrix limped off towards the army, the glare in her eye quite visible. She grabbed Erin by the shoulder, which might not have been a good idea at the time since the other woman was in the middle of a fight.

“G’haaaah!!!” screamed the pilot. She screamed even louder as she saw the infuriated look on the General’s face. “Look, I can explain!” she offered.

“We’ll talk about this later!” spat Beatrix, sensing that there were more important things at hand. “Right now we have work to do! Since you’re here, you might as well hold off the monsters while Steiner and I concentrate our attacks on that Cyclops.”

“Uh, what Cyclops?” said Erin. Beatrix groaned in misery, holding her forehead in hands that dearly wished to throttle the pilot.

“The one over *there!*” she barked, pointing an enraged finger in the direction of the beast. Beatrix

nearly choked as she saw the emptiness that was once occupied by the Cyclops. Only a decapitated body was left to fill the void.

“What in Hades...” she muttered. Suddenly, a terrifying imp latched onto the General, clawing and hissing as it hugged her fiercely. Erin screamed, and tried pounding on the monster with her fists. The imp only cackled more, and with arms of steel, it began to squeeze Beatrix’s neck.

“I...” was all the General could say before the world became black.

With a gasp, Steiner nearly screamed as he saw the Cyclops suddenly lose its head. For a very brief moment, the creature was left standing, perhaps unaware that it no longer had a neck. The behemoth eventually collapsed on the floor, sending a cloud of dust into the air. Steiner, amazed at what had just happened, could not find the words to express himself. He found his voice with surprising speed as he discovered who his savior was.

“YOU!!!!” He pointed at the other person fiercely, practically growling as he saw who had saved him. The figure merely laughed and sucked on her finger a little.

“Humph, you’re welcome!” she said. Steiner finally blew his top, and began leaping up in the air with the furor of a mad cricket.

“What in blazes are you doing here?!” he demanded. “How did you... why are you... Ack, I am so... urgh!!!” The woman before him merely cackled softly, looking somewhat innocent as she smiled.

“Now now,” she sang, “is that any way to greet an old friend?”

“You are hardly a friend!” pointed the Captain of the Pluto Knights. The woman’s smiling face turned sour, and she crossed her arms in defiance.

“Humph, and this is what I get for saving your skin!” Steiner nearly choked on his own rage, but was rudely interrupted by the woman. “Hold on, rusty—I gotta save your friend up there.” With a leap that would’ve made a flea jealous, the woman flew towards the imp that had grabbed hold of Beatrix. A single deft swipe robbed it of its life.

When Beatrix could see again, the horrible sound of monsters running amok had faded into an uncomfortable silence. She moaned as she woke, thanking her lucky stars that she was not outside in

the cold. Her happy mood soon turned into confusion as she saw her savior standing before her. With a grunt, Beatrix rubbed the haze out of her eyes and addressed the other woman.

“Lani?”

“The one and only!” Beatrix groaned again, shaking her head for good measure. She was able to breathe again, which must’ve been a good sign. Unable to stand just yet, all the General could do was look at the dark-skinned woman before her.

“What are you doing here?” she asked. Lani sighed and lost a little of her smile.

“That old tin can asked me the same thing,” she noted. Beatrix swallowed something down, and craned her head to look for the aforementioned knight.

“Where is Steiner? Is he all right?”

“*All right* would be an understatement,” replied Lani, kneeling down to examine the other woman. Beatrix absently let the bounty hunter check her vitals while she busied herself looking for her partner.

“That Steiner’s about as uppity as a raging bronco, and twice as ornery,” reported Lani, sounding like it was all part of Beatrix’s physical condition. The knight smiled faintly.

“Yes, it sounds like he’s all right,” she sighed. “But what *are* you doing here, anyway?” Lani continued treating Beatrix for a few seconds more, and stood to stretch herself out before answering.

“Well—”

“Yes, I would like to know that as well!” boomed a voice, and the familiar *clank-clank* sound of Steiner’s armor echoed across the cave. With a demanding voice and an accusing finger, he requested in no polite terms that Lani explain herself.

“Settle down, rust bucket,” she muttered. ‘I’ll tell you when I’m good and ready.’ Steiner growled, but could do nothing to change Lani’s mind. The bounty hunter grinned, and craned her head over to look at him. “Don’t worry!” she assured him. “I’m your ally today.” That last word, noted Beatrix, had been somewhat emphasized.

“What do you mean?” she asked. Lani sighed, taking one final examination of Beatrix.

Unbeknownst to most people, Lani was not only a great bounty hunter, but she also had some medical training under her belt. This came in handy whenever a bounty became... violent, or when a fellow partner... failed to perform with excellence.

“Well,” sighed the hunter, “my new boss asked me to do this job. Said it was some kind of initiation fee, or whatever. Basically, I was supposed to bring him the head of a very exotic monster.”

“A new boss?” said Steiner.

“Yeah, that’s what I said,” replied Lani sharply. “What, did the monsters make you go deaf or something?”

“Why you—!!!”

“Steiner, please,” sighed Beatrix. Slowly, with the help of Erin and Lani, the General was able to stand. She felt a little better, although not quite in peak condition. Smiling just barely, she thanked both women for their assistance.

“Go on, Miss Lani,” said Erin. “You said that your boss asked you to help us?”

“Sort of,” she replied. “I didn’t expect anybody else to be here, and although I didn’t need it, I am

grateful for the help.” She puffed her chest out proudly, and laughed in triumph over her victories. Steiner, as always, was steaming.

“Bahh!!” he snorted, and left it at that. The man in metal then departed from Mognet Central, and the girls could just barely hear him yell to the other moogles that all was clear.

“So Lani, who is this new boss of yours?” asked Beatrix. Lani smiled mischievously.

“He made me promise not to tell anyone,” she replied. “But let’s just say that you know him.”

“Oh.”

The minutes passed, and soon Erin and her cohorts were bidding a fond farewell to the moogles. The adorable creatures squeaked out their own good-bye as the Hilda Guarde 3 lifted off. On board, a new addition to the crew was finding it very difficult to keep her food down, and to the secret amusement of the crew, both Lani and Beatrix were often paying homage to gods porcelain.

To be continued...

2. Homecoming

Part Two: Homecoming

“Lady Beatrix? Miss Lani? Are you in there?” A dreadful pause.

“Go away.”

“But, we’ve arrived in Alexandria!!” Another pause. The door ripped open, and a sickly-looking Beatrix was on the other end.

“Are you sure?” she asked. Erin smiled and nodded her head fiercely.

“Yes, of course! We’re right outside the castle moat!” Beatrix nearly sang out for joy, and almost hugged the bubbly pilot in rapture as thoughts of home entered her mind. Like a true soldier, though, she let none of these wild emotions show through.

“That is... good news,” she sighed, leaning against the door. Erin smiled and tipped her head to the side, and told them that they could leave whenever they were ready. Lani, who was not recovering well, made a disgusting sound as she wailed into the toilet. Beatrix crinkled her nose and

stuck out her tongue in disgust, and decided that freshening up would be best before addressing her liege.

No sooner had she finished brushing her teeth and washing her face was Beatrix interrupted yet again. A maniacal Boyd, ignoring all formalities and titles as always, rushed straight into her bathroom without even touching the door with his knuckles. Beatrix almost scolded him for dashing into a lady's room unannounced, but Boyd beat her to the punch with a terrifying message.

“Invaders!!” he screamed, and collapsed on the floor. Beatrix's heart went to her throat, and after making sure the rude pilot was okay, she retrieved Save the Queen and dashed outside the airship. Steiner and Lani were nowhere to be found.

The time—One day after Beatrix, Steiner, Lani, and the crew of the Hilda Guard liberated Mognet Central.

The place—The immediate area outside of Alexandria kingdom.

The players—Beatrix, a knight under the service of Queen Garnet; Lani, a boisterous and vain bounty hunter; Adelbert Steiner, the bold and proud Captain

of the Pluto Knights; Commander Erin and the crew of the Hilda Guard 3.

Status—Chaos.

Beatrix soon understood what Boyd had meant the minute she stepped out of the Hilda. Hundreds and hundreds of ferocious creatures, some bearing resemblance to the monsters they had fought in Mognet Central, were swarming around the kingdom, each and every one causing a world's worth of havoc. With a sharp cry, Beatrix stared in horror as her kingdom and home turned into ruin yet again.

To the monster's grievous misfortune, this moment of terror did not last long. Wielding *Save the Queen* in front of her, Beatrix charged into the kingdom without any thought or concern of her own safety. *Protect the kingdom. Protect your home. Save the Queen. That is your duty.* Her sword master's words echoed in her mind a thousand times, and Beatrix thanked him silently, wherever he was.

Imps, ghouls, and satyrs had crowded around the moat surrounding Alexandria, and to Beatrix's fortune, several of her subordinate knights were already busy in the fight. Without a word or even an

introduction, Beatrix joined them and killed three imps in a single blow.

“General Beatrix!” called a soldier. Beatrix growled and began shouting orders.

“No time for socializing! Beat back the enemies and protect the inner courtyards! Make sure they don’t hit the town, either!”

“Too late!” shouted a soldier, slicing an imp’s hands off. “They’ve made it as far as the throne room already!”

“WHAT!!!! What has happened?!” Beatrix had no time for further inquiry, as a demonic host of half-lizards rose up out of the moat. Each one looked hungry enough to devour Steiner, armor and all. Beatrix, however, was a juicier morsel, albeit a more difficult one to fight. The knight couldn’t help but laugh as she easily skewered the potential handbags.

“What news of the Queen?” she shouted, resuming her position after the skirmish. She had to wait for a moment as the soldiers fought off a hoard of bats, and Beatrix stepped in to help.

“She’s okay!” shouted a soldier. “She’s in good hands! We have orders to protect this area of the kingdom!”

“I’ll ask questions later!” spat the holy knight, sensing that there were too many enemies around and not enough time for an interrogation. Her inflated curiosity would have to wait for a time; these monsters were too numerous, and had to be dealt with accordingly.

Beatrix and her knights kept the moat from becoming flooded with villainy and wickedness. Imps and hags rained down on them like sleet, and each one was severely punished for their intrusion. More half-lizards snaked up from the moat, and although they caused the most trouble, they were readily dealt with. However, even with the other knights, Beatrix knew she could not hold out for long.

Suddenly, an earth-shattering roar shook the General out of her fighting. An immense behemoth, hide as thick as stone and claws as sharp as scythes, lumbered onto the scene with murder in its eyes. Beatrix cursed, and ordered three of her finest knights to accompany her while the others take care of the monsters left behind. The foursome charged forward...

BOOM!!!!

The behemoth suddenly ceased to exist in the span of a second. In its place stood an explosion of intestines, blood, bones, and other miscellaneous body parts. Somehow, the creature had spontaneously combusted... but how?

“Heeeeeeeeeey yooooooooou guuuuuuuuys!!!!!!!” Beatrix turned around fiercely, spotting the guns of the Hilda Guard 3 smoking somewhat. Erin waved at them like a loon, and several of the pilots stormed out of the airship with her. The guns fired again, scorching what would have been an otherwise terrifying foe.

“Erin!!” Beatrix was so happy, she felt like kissing the pilot right then and there, but she settled for a pretty smile. Erin’s smile outdid them all, and a recovered Lani was there beside her.

“Ha! Bet you’re glad that Regent Cid installed cannons on this thing!” beamed Erin. Beatrix nodded her head, eager to have some heavy artillery in the fight at last. Pushing aside her concern for the Queen and her friends, Beatrix thanked Erin and resumed the battle, Lani following her with a gigantic axe in tow.

Most of the pilots helped to wipe out the monsters in the moat, but Erin and Boyd followed

Beatrix and Lani into the town. There, around the statue of the heroine Madeline, was a group of ferocious tiger-wolfs, each one looking as hungry as the half-lizards that Beatrix had helped. Suddenly, one of the tiger-wolfs misplaced his head, and another had his skull split in twain. Beatrix smiled with relief as she saw Steiner holding his own.

“Persistent kittens, aren’t we?” he shouted. Focusing his powers into his blade, Steiner performed what many considered to be his most effective attack: with the Blood Sword in hand, he executed a perfect Dark Side, both expending and refreshing his energy at the same time. The unfortunate creature that became the target of his hate was soon permanently relieved of the flea problem it had had earlier that season.

Wordlessly, Beatrix and Lani joined the knight, each one cleaving a creature in two. Steiner smiled as he saw his friend—and Lani—cut into the enemy line, though he made no effort to speak yet. Only after Erin pierced the eyes of one, and Boyd bashed the jaws of another, did he address his fellow fighters.

“What a mess!” he exclaimed, and nobody could disagree. Sensing the urgency of the surroundings,

Steiner shouted out the current situation as best he knew how. “There are hundreds of beasts around here, many of unknown origin! I know not where they came nor why they are here, but I do know that we must defend her majesty at all costs!”

“Yes!” agreed Beatrix. Turning to Boyd and Erin, she requested that the pilots stay with Steiner and help him clear the other creatures out. They obeyed, and remained to help fight off a new wave of land piranha. This left Beatrix and Lani to push forward alone.

After easily cutting through a line of Mus and ghosts, Beatrix and Lani came across a very welcome sight: Quina was emptily chewing on the remains of what used to be a hedgehog pie. The creatures scattered around the Qu indicated that many more monsters had met similar fates. Since the area was clear, the two warriors were free to converse with their hungry ally.

“Quina!! What a relief to find you here!” gasped Beatrix. The Qu dropped its meal and bounced up in the air.

“Beatrix! You here at last! I had to fight here with Pluto Knights! But no worry-worry, they stronger

than they look! They leave me here to stand guard, so I not know where they are now.”

“I’m sure that you fought bravely as always,” said Beatrix with a smile. “But can you tell me what the devil is going on?!”

“I not know,” sighed Quina. “I was cooking, when monsters came from nowhere! There many-many battles, many-many people hurt! I help though, give them food so they live! But I called in to fight, so I show knights what I made of!”

“Marvelous!” cackled Lani merrily. “Simply marvelous! S/he deserves a medal!”

“No-no, medals not tasty,” insisted Quina. Lani gave him a look but kept her smile.

“Quina,” said Beatrix, who was somewhat more serious than her comrade, “can you tell me where her majesty is?”

“That easy,” s/he said. Quina turned around, and pointed a fork in the direction of the castle. “Garnet over there. There MANY monsters there, so all soldiers fight there too, even Queen! Maybe I help them later.”

“WHAT?!” shrieked the knight. “You mean her highness is in the battle as well?”

“Yes-yes!” nodded Quina. “Everyone fight! Too many monsters to count! I help later, but make sure things okay here first.”

“Good idea,” nodded Lani. She tapped Beatrix’s shoulder, and urged them to proceed forward. The bounty hunter went first, dashing towards the inner moat to clear the way. Beatrix stayed behind just long enough to thank Quina and wish the cook good luck.

True to the Qu’s words, what seemed like a literal army of demons and nasties were crowding around the castle, ripping it apart and being ripped apart themselves. Among the warriors visible, all the Knights of Pluto save Steiner were there, fighting their hearts and souls out. The remainder of the Alexandrian force was there as well, and the girls almost cheered as they caught sight of the majority of the Vivis engaged in battle as well.

But they did not see the Queen, nor was Zidane present. Beatrix reasoned that the boy must be protecting Garnet himself, but she still rushed into the castle. The front door was temporarily barred by

a group of ogres; I say temporarily because these ogres were impaled several minutes later.

Fighting as many creatures as they could find, Beatrix and Lani raced into and throughout the castle, sometimes running into an injured ally. Beatrix healed them properly whilst Lani watched their backs, and sometimes it was the other way around. Finally, through a severe trial of ogres, giant scorpions, Cyclopes, and dragons (*Why does this regiment look so familiar?* Beatrix thought), the duo finally made it to the throne room, where a surprise awaited them.

Inside the throne room, two warriors were busy fending off the most brutal of all the demons. One of them was a short immature boy with golden hair over his head and a tail protruding out of his body; the other was a tall and muscular man with lethal claws and hair as red as the fires of Hell. Only the boy greeted them.

“Oh, hey! It’s General Beatrix!!” He smiled that same goofy smile of his, even as an ogre slammed its fist on his head. Beatrix, knowing he would be all right, merely sighed in defeat.

“Hey, Red!!!” screamed Lani. The other man paid her no heed. “What kind of nerve do you have,

leaving me there on Mognet Central Island? And what was that business about you ‘not being paid to kill monsters’? I nearly died myself!!”

“Nice to see you too,” muttered Amarant calmly. He dashed forward and ripped what looked like an Iron Giant in two, and the creature died as its body was cut open. Amarant sniffed and pointed at the two knights. “Hey, the kid here could use a hand.”

“I’m okay,” groaned Zidane, shaking his yellowy head. He smiled weakly, giving the ladies a thumbs-up, and leaped back into battle formation. Lani groaned and more or less busied herself with a Minotaur that had just showed up; Beatrix smiled briefly and joined the Genome.

“Tell me,” she said, keeping a Merman at bay, “where is the Queen?”

“In her bedroom. Some of the Vivis are protecting her,” replied Zidane. He dashed forward, slicing the merman apart until scales fell on the floor. Beatrix frowned and finished the creature off.

“She was with us for awhile,” stated Amarant calmly. He then rushed forward like a locomotive, turning a fierce poisonous wasp into shredded cheese. He came back to his original position, his

breathing no higher than normal. It was as if Amarant was two people at once: the calm and sometimes cold mercenary, and the ferocious and flaming assassin. He was in fact both, all rolled into one lethal package, and he killed a Cyclops monster to prove it.

“And?”

“And what?”

“What happened that made her retreat into her bedroom?” Amarant sniffed, wiping the enemy’s blood off his arm. Zidane, in the meantime, had helped Lani with the Minotaur, who was currently missing more than just his two horns.

“Safety,” replied the Flaming one. Beatrix frowned in thought.

“I see. Well, her bedroom is somewhat safer than the throne room.”

“Not by much,” said Amarant casually. “One of the Vivis stopped.”

“You mean...” Beatrix froze, her speech dead in her throat. She closed her eye, and silently mourned the loss. “I see...”

“Hey, above you,” said Amarant quietly, and Beatrix had to practically fall out of the way as a Garuda swooped down on her. She repaid the kind act by lovingly shoving her blade through its body.

“What’s up with these monsters?!” demanded Lani, slicing a demonic porcupine. “It’s like every time we kill one, two more come to replace it!”

“That was fast,” said Amarant, leaving everyone to wonder over his strange speech. Zidane, who was currently wrestling with a mischievous goblin, had no comment.

“What was?”

“You figured out their strategy pretty fast,” said Amarant mysteriously. Lani began fuming and glared at him.

“Huh? Don’t talk to me as if I’m some dumb idiot!” Amarant shrugged, and without any warning at all, walked out of the throne room and towards the kitchen.

“Hey, wait! RED!!!!” Lani screamed out his name, and chased after him as he escaped. Beatrix, needless to say, was becoming exhausted and confused.

“I wonder what’s gotten into him?” she wheezed, finishing off another beast. Zidane shrugged and began punching the goblin.

“There’s a monster (whack!) in this castle (biff!) who regenerates (sock!) other monsters (bam!)! And (smack!) that’s where he’s (crunch!) going!”

“But why did you not go there first?!” demanded Beatrix. Zidane knocked the goblin into the nether regions and back, and threw the offending creature out the window before speaking.

“Well, we had to take care of the others first!!” He sighed, leaning on his knees as he caught his breath. Beatrix also took time to rest and examine the room. All the monsters that had flooded the throne room were either dead or dying. With a sudden groan of exhaustion, Zidane flopped on the floor and wheezed dramatically.

“Can’t... move... another inch...” he gasped. Beatrix frowned, though she knew that every mortal being, regardless of how or why they were created, had a breaking point sometime. She smiled just faintly as she allowed the young boy to rest.

“Not even to protect your Queen?” she stated, kneeling down to look at him. Zidane flopped on the

ground like a fish out of water, but could not even move for Garnet.

“If... I could...” he wheezed, “then... I would...” Beatrix smiled a little broader, and commended the lad for his efforts.

“Rest easy, sir, you’ve had a busy day...” She patted him on the shoulder like a soldier would, and left the boy to catch his breath. For safety measures, she made sure that no monsters would infiltrate the throne room.

Beatrix’s battles came to a brief conclusion suddenly. A piercing howl, one that would have been emitted by some kind of demonic creature, echoed throughout the castle and even outside. With a reasonable amount of concern, the knight noticed that the cry had come from the kitchen.

A minute passed before two figures emerged from the halls. One was a screaming Lani, who kept on berating her taller companion for some unseen offense. The other, noticing Beatrix standing there, merely saluted weakly and said only one enigmatic phrase.

“Monster’s dead.” And without another word, Amarant Coral left the castle of Alexandria, a very

confused Beatrix and a very irritated Lani in his wake.

She let out a gusty sigh of relief as she slumped on her bed. Exhausted beyond definition, the woman could only breathe as she laid on her soft bed. With weak hands, she managed to disrobe somewhat and snuggle up in the soft mattress. A welcome pillow supported her head, and she let out a sigh as she began to recall the events of the past few days.....

“Your majesty!” Garnet breathed out a sigh of relief as she saw Beatrix scurry into her room. She collapsed on the bed and let out a groan.

“I’m so glad to see you, Beatrix,” sighed the queen. Beatrix smiled with relief, equally jovial that her liege was okay, and tried her best to remain strong. The past two days had been nothing but battles for her, and although she was a holy knight, she was used to such obstacles. Still, even Beatrix had a breaking point, and it had been reached more than once in the past two days.

“Highness... I...” began the knight. She swallowed, and knelt on the floor (in reality, she was secretly resting from all the strenuous work she had done). “I... have reports to give and questions to ask. You above all people should be able to receive what I have to say.”

“Proceed, and have a seat,” urged the Queen. “You must be completely wiped out from all the fighting that has been going on.” Beatrix nodded her head, thanked the queen, and found a footstool to sit on. Garnet politely asked the Vivi squadron to leave, and they did so without a word (one of them thanked Beatrix, though).

“Now,” said the Queen, looking into her guardian’s eye, “what do you have to say?”

“I’ll be blunt, majesty,” answered the knight. “I want to know where these enemies came from, how they got to Alexandria, and why we were so ill-prepared.” The Queen sighed, folding her hands in her lap. She had expected those very questions, in those very words, to be asked.

“All right, I understand,” she said. “But I’d like to gather everybody around. There is no doubt that the entire kingdom will want to know what has happened. Beatrix, if you would be so kind, please

summon everyone in the town square. I have an announcement to make.”

“I obey,” saluted the knight.

Thirty minutes passed, and all of Alexandria was gathered in the town square. Garnet stood atop a crudely-made platform, a primitive amplifier in front of her. Beatrix, Steiner, a recovered Zidane, Quina, a slew of Vivis, Erin, Boyd, Lani, and even Amarant were up with her, acting as fellow witnesses and councilors.

“Now,” began the Queen, “I realize that you all have lots of questions on your mind, and I hope to answer them all. Let me first assure you that all invaders have been accounted for, including the chief monster who was responsible for regenerating the others. The dead are being honored and the living are being praised, but now is a time of reconstruction and answers.

“My first order of business is to explain where these monsters came from, how and why they invaded Alexandria, and so forth. Let me assure you that nobody present knows their origin, nor do they know their intent. The only thing that we know is that these evils had belligerent intent, and so they had to be stopped, regardless of origin.”

Unfortunately, their attack came at a bad time, when both General Beatrix and Captain Steiner were away. Had these two warriors been present, I feel that the dead in our cemeteries would not be quite as numerous. I have asked my most trusted advisors about this revelation, and all we can speculate is that this may have been the enemy's plan: to draw out our armies into a false battle while they carry the real fight to our home."

That makes sense to me, thought Beatrix to herself. She noticed that Steiner had hissed an "Aha!", so he too must've understood.

"I do not know where these monsters came from," resumed Garnet, "nor do I know why they attacked. I have, however, been given council to prepare for any more attacks that may arrive. Rest assured, citizens of Alexandria: we will fight those that wish to disrupt our peace."

"Hey!!! Where do you think you're going?!?!?"

"Outside." The woman growled as the man made no other sound.

"So that's it?!" she yelled. "You're leaving already!?"

"Yup."

“But you heard the Queen!” insisted Lani. “There might be another attack!”

“It’s not my fight,” said Amarant blankly. He continued walking, only partially aware of the screaming woman behind him.

“What!! And after all they did for you, too!”

“I hold no allegiance with them,” stated Amarant plainly. Lani snorted, and decided to just ignore the Flaming one.

“Humph, well be that way then!” She hefted her axe, and stormed off towards Lindblum. Amarant had no desire to ask her where she was going, or why she was not staying behind. After all, none of it was his business.

From high atop her room, Garnet noticed that both Amarant and Lani were leaving Alexandria. With a hushed “thank you”, she bade the two hunters farewell, and hoped to see them again under better circumstances. Suddenly, two fierce hands grabbed her and snapped her away from her thoughts.

“AAAAHHHH!!!!”

“Ssh!! Jeez, you don’t have to scream!” Garnet practically had a seizure as she turned around to face Zidane, but the look she gave him was far deadlier than any debilitating physical condition. “WHOA!! Hey, I was just kidding!”

“The sheer nerve of sneaking up on me like that!” she spat. Zidane smiled and tried in vain to smooth out her angry face. He had to admit, she looked awfully cute when she was mad.

“Hey, I said I was sorry, right?” Garnet sighed, and walked past the boy in irritation. Before she left the room, she turned around and gave him a malicious look.

“I’ll get you for that, Zidane Tribal!” she threatened. The grin on the boy’s face showed that he was looking forward to whatever surprises the Queen could throw at him. She sighed, shook her head, and walked outside her room.

“Women,” he moaned. He then proceeded to flop onto her bed, and did not get up until ordered to by Steiner.

Several uncertain days passed, and so far, no terrible force had come to complete the work that the monsters had started. What damage they did had

been repaired, and life began to return to normal. Disputes and crises in foreign lands were handled by skeleton crews; the finer warriors stayed behind to protect the kingdom. Alexandria had to be prepared.

Of course, this brief intermission of peace did not last long. To Garnet's horror, messengers arrived in the castle a week or so after the monsters were cleared out. They spoke of a terrifying army of mindless soldiers, and a ferocious leader that had been hidden in mystery up until now.

Usually the Queen would not be concerned. After all, she had faced the horrors of Terra and Pandemonium, so what were mere mortals in comparison? But the messenger insisted that these were no ordinary troops. Though mysteries hung in the air, it was a proven fact that this leader, whoever he was, commanded an army of Golems.

Usage of Golems in battle was forbidden long before the birth of Cid Falbool V. The creatures, which were magical humanoids brought forth from the dirt and clay of the earth, were mindless, soulless soldiers that had no will or conscience of their own. They were stronger and hardier than men, but were terribly difficult to make if one did not know the right wizard.

Finding the fiend who had created this army was a priority, but battling the fiend who led the army came first. If this unknown leader could be pushed out of the picture, then an opportunity to hunt down the wizard responsible would present itself. For now, though, Garnet had to ready her troops and reward the messengers. All in all, it only took one day for the troops to be assembled.

There was no question in who would lead them. Beatrix and Steiner would each command a unit in the front lines, while Zidane would have the Knights of Pluto and a backup unit waiting in reserve. The magicians and archers would be placed in several key locations, and a host of hired mercenaries would lie in wait in places only they knew about. Garnet would act as Supreme Commander, with Quina as her personal bodyguard.

Beatrix and Steiner each had an entire legion under their care, and for good reason. These two fine knights were positioned in the front lines, where the action would be hottest. Arrows and spells would rain down on their heads the hardest, and if they failed, the castle would have been overrun. Of course, they also commanded some of the finest troops in the whole kingdom, so it was unlikely that any foe would get past them.

One day had passed since the message came to Garnet's ears. In that time, the fledgling monarch had outshined herself in ability and skill. Already there was a swarm of devoted knights, soldiers, and fighters willing to march under her banner. Some likened it to the days when Brahne was on the throne (and in her right state of mind, of course).

Sighing, Beatrix looked at Steiner's unit, which was some distance away from hers. The plan was basically to trap the enemy in a pincer move, then the mercs hiding away would storm in from behind. Even if that failed, there would be plenty of archers and mages on the turrets of the castle to ambush anyone who came near. Many of the Vivis were among the wizards above.

With a slight smile, Beatrix looked over Steiner's unit. She was tempted to wave at the other knight, but she knew full well that A) such actions did not suit a General, and B) Steiner might take it as a signal to move forward or retreat. She merely smiled, and wiped the hair out of her eye.

"(General!)" whispered a soldier. She handed Beatrix a telescope, and with her left eye, Beatrix peered through it. In the distance, she spotted a lone man on horseback and a large army of Golems

marching behind him. She swallowed and handed the scope back to the soldier.

“They’re here,” she said. Turning around, Beatrix signaled for the archers and mages to prepare their assault. Garnet had not received news of any visitors to the kingdom, and experienced Beatrix would have recognized a friendly face. The man leading the army looked to be anything but friendly.

Rumble...

The ground shivered beneath them, almost as if it were afraid of what was to come. Beatrix pursed her lips and hugged the hilt of Save the Queen. Protect the kingdom. Protect your home. Save the Queen.

“Master Atma,” she whispered, “give me your strength in this battle...” Praying to her old sword master, Beatrix calmed herself just enough to beat back the bubbling adrenaline in her body. With a shout, she gave the signal for the mages and archers to fire, and before the yell ended, a hailstorm of arrows and spells blazed through the air.

Steiner silently cheered to himself as the storm of arrows and spells struck the advancing army. Golems fell down like ninepins as they were struck,

some slamming to the floor as fast as lightning. But to his shock, the army continued to march mercilessly, their leader staring ahead with cold, maniacal eyes.

“What!! It is as if they are not even aware that we are attacking them!” blurted Steiner. He growled, and shouted orders to his troops. “Don’t charge them yet! Wait until the forces above us finish their rounds! We don’t want anyone being injured unnecessarily!”

“Aye, Captain!” sang the chorus of soldiers. Steiner pursed his lips, anxiously waiting for the mages to cease. The Golems continued marching, even as they were being picked off one by one. They mercilessly stormed forward, their pace no quicker or slower than when it had begun.

Suddenly, the leader of the force screamed.

“Victory or death!!!!” And with a bone-chilling shout, the entire army ceased its mindless march and ran forward in a lunatic frenzy. Steiner growled, and unsheathed his mighty blade in response. Out of the corner of his eye did he see Beatrix and her unit do the same.

“Charge!!!” he roared, and the knights of Alexandria needed no further introduction. Steiner and Beatrix slammed into the two sides of the army, effectively trapping it into a pincer attack as swords and shields and spears and axes and maces crashed and clanged and smashed and broke and bled and sliced and cut and bashed; bloody chaos.

Yet still the forces fought back. The leader managed to pull away from the vicious fracas, taking a small skeleton force with him as he charged through the castle doors. Steiner and Beatrix each let out a bloody expletive, but were far too immersed in the main battle to think about other matters. This new force would have to be dealt with by other means.

“Hey!! Who are you!?” The leader of the Golems, and ordinary-looking human man, merely smiled triumphantly as he saw the boy.

“Nobody of concern, child,” he answered, his voice as calm and cool as spring. Zidane cursed and lurched forward, his Ultimate Weapon in his hand.

“Yeah, well you’re about to become nobody in a few seconds!!” The leader merely kept his smile in response, and coolly guided his forces forward. Zidane, swearing that the unknown man “had asked

for it”, charged forward with his weapon and cleaved the first Golem he saw in two. He cursed violently as they continued marching, and was soon busy fighting more. The Knights of Pluto rallied behind him, and soon they too joined the massacre.

Even with this new threat, the leader managed to escape the battle and push forward. With the entire Alexandrian army now behind him, the enigmatic man could continue his pursuit in leisure. Zidane merely cursed as he slipped away into the castle...

Ever the gentleman, the mysterious yet lethal leader of the Golem army knocked on the Queen’s throne room door. He did not expect to receive any reply, though, so when his manners failed, he simply broke the door down with a powerful kick. To his delight, the Queen of the land was indeed hiding out here, but she was protected by a rather bloated and somewhat disgusting creature.

“Who you?” demanded the fat thing. The man pursed his lips in a frown.

“I could very well ask the same thing,” he stated. The creature bounced on its stubby feet and shook its head. A long, reddened tongue wiggled from its mouth like a worm on a hook.

“I Quina!” boomed the monster. “I Garnet’s personal cook! I her bodyguard too, so you no touch her!”

“Indeed,” muttered the mysterious man. Spying Garnet in the room with a lethal Tiger Racket in her hands, he bowed gracefully and introduced himself.

“My dear lady Garnet,” he sang, “I am a man whom nobody knows, nor would they remember me even if they were told. Let me just introduce myself as a man known only as The Foe.”

“The... Foe?”

“Yes...” The man smiled a haunting smile, and stood to his full height. Quina grunted and pointed a fork in the man’s direction.

“I no care who you are!” s/he stated. “You not welcome in lady’s room! Leave now or I cook you up!”

“Cook? Oh dear, that does not sound very civil.”

“Who are you... really?” demanded Garnet. “Why have you come to Alexandria? Why are you invading us?” The Foe smiled at her, and saluted merrily.

“That’s for me to know and for you to never find out.” He grinned, and without warning, pulled a vicious-looking sword out of his hilt. The monster blade looked more like the jaws of a shark than a sword, and perhaps it was. The jagged teeth on it looked sharp enough to cut through stone.

“Be careful, Quina!!” shouted the ruler of the kingdom. The gluttonous Qu merely laughed.

“Ha, he no challenge! I beat him like egg!” With a shout, Quina bounced forward and engaged The Foe in a vicious duel.....

An unknown period of time passed.

Steiner weakly advanced, barely strong enough to even carry his sword, let alone swing it. The armor he wore felt like it was made out of granite, and every footstep was like lifting a couch up. His breath came out in great heaving gasps, and almost all of his armor was either dented or encrusted with dust. He was just barely able to walk over to Beatrix, who believe it or not, looked even worse than he did.

“We... We defeated them...” He wheezed one more time, and fell to the soil on his knees. Beatrix, who was lying flat on the ground in weak rapture, merely smiled.

“You... were great, Steiner...” He sighed, far too weak to become flushed or even proud. Instead, Steiner merely smiled and managed a thumbs-up. Beatrix moaned softly, and tried to get up, but her muscles failed her. She let out a curse as she realized that she was unable to move.

“Steiner?” she whispered. “Get a mage or a medic for me... please? I... can’t seem to move.”

“I... would... if I could...” muttered the knight. He too fell to the ground, and laid on his back as he collapsed. Both knights shared a weak chuckle before passing out from exhaustion.

“Ha! No sweat!” Zidane smiled arrogantly, beating on his chest as the very last Golem crumbled to pieces. To be sure, his own body was tenderized like so much sirloin, and a few spots here and there were covered in red. But the bright Genome was standing at least, and one of the Pluto Knights was up with him.

“Sir Zidane!” called the knight, Dojebon. “We should hurry over to the Queen’s room! I have a feeling that she needs help!”

“Oh, that’s right!” exclaimed the kid. “That strange guy went over in that direction! Hey, come

on!” And with that, the two fighters rushed off towards the castle, nothing save the Queen’s safety in their minds...

With a shriek, Garnet covered her eyes as The Foe dove forward, nearly skewering Quina in the process. The fat Qu bounced aside and whacked the man with his fork like he was a baseball. Blood and spittle flew in several directions as the blunt part of the fork struck him, but other than a noticeable bruise on his head, The Foe remained unharmed.

“You wretch,” he spat wickedly. “You will pay for that!” Quina growled, daring the man to make good on his threats. The Foe stood and charged again, swiping at Quina with his jagged sword. One single slice would have carved the Qu up like so much duck during holidays.

Quina avoided getting shredded, though apron s/he wore suffered a blow. Enraged over the loss of the precious uniform, the Qu leaped forward and bashed the man with a gigantic fork. But The Foe was quick to react this time, and before Quina could take another step, he jammed the very tip of the blade in the cook’s belly.

“QUINA!!!!!!!!!!” Garnet screamed at the very top of her lungs as the wicked man pierced her

friend, and Quina slowly collapsed on the floor.

“Ah, no worry-worry,” s/he mumbled. “Is not bad. Quina feel worse when fight Kuja!” Garnet growled at the man, who merely smiled back as he displayed his fearsome weapon.

“Let me guess,” he whispered. “I’m going to pay for this, am I right?”

“Just shut up and fight!” spewed the Queen, an animalistic look to her pretty face. This took The Foe by surprise for a second—only for a second, though. He snarled, and charged forth with his blade. Garnet raised her Tiger Racket and blocked the blow, and gave the man a kick in the crotch for Quina.

“And that’s just the start!” she roared, glaring at him icily. As The Foe winced in pain, she brought her Racket back and used the added speed to swing it with a force unknown to stronger women. The rod bashed against The Foe’s head, sending him to the floor in pain. Garnet mercilessly jumped after him, beating his body again and again with her racket.

“You pig!” she screamed, tenderizing the man like so much pork. “Animal! Barbarian! Illegitimate son of a worthless mother! Spineless, no-good,

shifty, wicked, malevolent, belligerent, evil, nasty, putrid...” A long string of even nastier words followed this, some so vile they would have given Zidane nightmares.

Speaking of which, the injured Genome and Dojebon rushed into the Queen’s room just in time to witness her go berserk on The Foe. After nearly vomiting from the sheer shock of his Queen lashing out in a rage, Dojebon meekly approached the enraged woman, his hands held out in front of him.

“Uh, highness?” he said. Garnet roared like a tiger and turned to face her knight. Suddenly, as she saw Dojebon and the man she loved standing there, tears came to her eyes and the fiery emotion that had possessed her was gone. Quivering, she fell to her knees, the Tiger Racket stained with red goo.

“Oh, man!” grunted Zidane, himself feeling sick over the spectacle. “I never thought you had it in you!” Garnet shuddered, and raised her head just enough to look at him. In the midst of her tears, a choking laugh came out.

“And that’s what I’ll do to you,” she sobbed, “if you ever sneak up on me again!” He laughed merrily, and bent down to hold the crying Queen in his arms.

“Guh...” A gurgling sound came from the floor, and Garnet’s face brightened as a voice rose up from Quina’s unresponsive form.

“Guh... I so hungry..... Could use some piecea...”

One day had passed since.

Queen Garnet let out a gusty sigh of relief as she slumped on her bed. Exhausted beyond definition, the woman could only breathe as she laid on her soft bed. With weak hands, she managed to disrobe somewhat and snuggle up in the soft mattress. A welcome pillow supported her head, and she let out a sigh as she began to recall the events of the past few days.....

One day passed.

Frowning with pride, Steiner stood atop the stairs, watching over the doors that led to their quarters. He took a deep breath, and bellowed out a cry.

“Pluto Knights!! ASSEMBLE!!!”

Dead silence.

“Not again!” groaned the rusty one. He glared at the unopened door, and marched down the stairs to see what was the matter. Suddenly, the oaken portal opened, and eight fully-armed knights stormed out, nearly flattening their leader in the process.

“Oh! Sir! We didn’t see you there, sir!” barked Blutzen. Steiner moaned and rubbed his head.

“I would not have been injured if you clowns came when I called!” he roared.

“But sir! Kohel lost his socks! It took us awhile to find them...”

“LOST HIS SOCKS?!?!?” screamed Steiner. ‘Why of all the ignorant, irresponsible, and incompetent things to do! Ha! It’s a miracle you all can even *wear* armor, much less be Pluto knights!’ The eight “warriors” moaned and sighed out an apology.

“I’m SO sorry!” whined Kohel. “I’ll keep them on my feet forever so they’ll never get lost again!”

“Ugh, no thanks,” sneered Weimar, crinkling his nose. Steiner coughed, and with a strange amount of

civility, gained the attention of his knights.

“Enough tomfoolery!” he grunted. “At least the eight of you are *present* today! Perhaps you should be commended, but we have more important matters to worry over!”

“Yes, sir!” barked Mullenkedheim. “Ready to hear the briefing, sir!”

“Right!” Steiner cleared his throat, and pacing around like an old army general, he briefed his troops on the upcoming battle. “Ahem! In these past few days, our beloved kingdom of Alexandria has come under attack twice from enemies foreign to our shores. I, for one, am disgusted that we even suffered *one* attack, let alone two. Our proud kingdom should be better defended than that!”

“Sir! We’re sorry, sir!” chanted a reply.

“Hm, yes, well, it’s all in the past,” coughed their Captain. “But anyway, we have won a decisive victory over our foes, but the fight does not end there! Do any of you clods know why I have summoned you here?”

“Sir! No we don’t, sir!”

“I thought as much,” grunted Steiner softly. He cleared his throat and continued. “Well, we the Pluto Knights have been asked by our liege, Queen Garnet of Alexandria, to go out into the world and investigate why our fair kingdom has been attacked. We are to go to every village, unravel every clue, overturn any rock, and ask any person about the invading force. Once I believe we have suitable information, we are to report our findings to the Queen! This investigation may take a while, so wrap up any businesses you may have here before traveling! We meet here, tomorrow at dawn!”

“Sir, yes sir!” Steiner nodded his head proudly, and dismissed the knights for the day. He sighed and questioned why he, of all people, had been chosen to baby-sit such a mismatched group of soldiers. It was true that they sometimes pulled through for him, but more often than not, they were lazy or else off on their own world.

“Intolerable...” muttered Steiner to himself. He sighed, and marched away to attend to his own business.

Slowly but surely, life in Alexandria was returning to normal. Construction efforts moved quickly, and the entire kingdom was sparkling

within days. Despite the back-to-back invasions, there had been very few casualties, which meant less funerals for the Queen to attend. Of course, many soldiers were awarded for their bravery.

And among all those praised, Zidane was “rewarded” the best...

It would normally be considered sacrilege and scandalous, but anyone who had known them for a long time (like Steiner) would understand the true depth and meaning of the relationship. Here she was, Queen of all of Alexandria, and she was taking care of a common thief. Of course, this thief was anything but common—the tail alone proved it.

Garnet smiled as she tended to the wounds of her love, but Zidane smiled even more. He considered himself the luckiest guy in the world, but who wouldn’t feel fortunate if they saw a pretty young girl taking care of their wounds? Garnet too felt happy, and slightly empowered by the arrangement. On several occasions, she would gently poke or pinch at his wounds, reminding him that she had the upper hand and he did not. Zidane, of course, would not have it any other way.

“Hey, don’t you think it’s time for my sponge bath?” He grinned, but Garnet regarded him with

measured impatience. However, she was a crafty girl, and knew just how to manipulate situations like this.

“Actually, I do!” she replied. Zidane coughed and sat out of bed, ignoring the bruises he had received while defending the kingdom. Garnet smiled and began to fill a basin full of water, and poor Zidane perspired like mad as he imagined the Queen giving him a personal bath. It was every man’s dream to have a gorgeous girl like Garnet bathe them, but only he was lucky enough to live it.

He smiled an unusually big and goofy smile as Garnet threw a sponge into the water, but the smile faded as she dumped the contents of the basin onto his injured body. With a gigantic splash, Zidane quickly turned from dry to soaking, and Garnet’s smile transformed into a laugh. He cringed, shivering slightly as the water soaked himself and his clothes. The Queen chuckled, and gave him a look that almost suggested apology.

“No more crass remarks, okay?” she sang. Zidane mumbled, but secretly enjoyed having so much attention poured on him (no pun intended). Garnet chuckled at his sullen disposition, and ruffled his hair as she gently placed a kiss on his nose.

Beatrix sighed.

“Pluto Knights! ASSEMBLE!!!” And as she expected, nobody came. “Confound it!!! Where are they *now*?!” The lady couldn’t help but smile as Steiner cursed, and dutifully walked over to the door that led to their quarters. She opened it up, finding several knights engaged in a rousing poker game. With a moan, she rallied them herself.

“Pluto Knights! Do you not hear your Captain?!” The knights jumped out of their skin as she barked, and quickly hurried to assemble outside in the hall. Beatrix frowned, likening their scrambling efforts to a flock of chickens—though this was somewhat less chaotic.

Finally, after a few minutes of running around, the knights stormed out of the room and into the hall. They saluted Beatrix and their Captain, but poor Steiner couldn’t help but groan.

“Will you guys *ever* come when I call?” he moaned. The soldiers blanched and tried giving excuses, but neither knight would hear it. Each and every one of them were promised a punishment unless they proved themselves worthy in the investigation report. This certainly made things grimmer, but it also helped to raise their spirits.

“All right!” barked Steiner. “Roll call! Captain Steiner, Pluto Knight I!”

“Blutzen, Pluto Knight II!”

“Kohel, Pluto Knight III!”

“Laudo, Pluto Knight IV!”

“Dojebon, Pluto Knight V!”

“Breireicht, Pluto Knight VI!”

“Weimar, Pluto Knight VII!”

“Haagen, Pluto Knight VIII!”

“Mullenkedheim, Pluto Knight IX!”

“Good, everyone’s here!” Steiner actually let out a proud smile, and marched down the stairs to rally his troops. He saluted Beatrix, who copied the move perfectly.

“May you find success, Captain Steiner!” she exclaimed. “And may you return home quickly and safely!”

“And may the kingdom be at peace during our absence!” echoed Steiner. He gave a shout, and pointed his finger at the door that led outside. “CHARGE!!!” The Knights obeyed zealously, and

Beatrix couldn't help but smile as she saw them scurry away.

“Oh, I will miss him,” she sighed once they left. Shrugging, she stepped outside into the courtyards and began to do her rounds. With the Pluto Knights gone, there would be fewer people patrolling the area, so it was left up to Beatrix to make sure that the kingdom was safe.

Breathe. That's all I can really do for now. Except crawl, maybe. I can't stand up, but can anybody really blame me? I probably will never be able to walk again, unless I get some medical attention in the next day or so. My legs are completely destroyed—my whole body feels like it is on fire. At one point, it was.

Breathe. And crawl. I'm defenseless now, but can anybody really blame me? After what I have been through, most people would be shocked to find me still breathing, let alone crawling on the ground as such... I'm surprised I even kept my sanity all this time... No normal living creature would keep hold of their mind after what I have seen and done. Does that make me special? Or just stubborn?

Breathe. Claw. The ground receives scars as my fingers dig into it. My hands become filthy as they rake across the ground, but they are the only thing that keeps me moving. I don't even know why I'm bothering, except that, if by some laughable chance I make it, perhaps I can warn them... before it is... too late...

Breathe. Claw. And please, don't pass out.

General Beatrix of Alexandria took in a deep breath. Even though she knew that she would not need her weapon, she kept it tucked inside her sheath anyway. Alexandria was now at peace again, for the moment, and with Steiner and his knights away, it was up to the General to make sure that that peace remained.

She stepped outside of her room and decided to investigate the castle first. The main hall seemed fine, and the kitchen was lively though safe. Quina, who had fully recovered, invited the General to stay for a snack. Despite the groaning that came from her tummy, Beatrix declined, even as Quina offered her a slice of piecea.

Moving away from the kitchen and towards the library, Beatrix poked her head inside and found nothing more than the usual group of scholars. It

was foolishness to think that any beasts would be lurking around the library, and if there had been, they would have been too stupid to bother with. Why settle for shelves of books when the Queen rested high above?

Beatrix scanned through the dungeons and sneered in disgust as several cellmates whistled and hollered at her. Most were more hideous than a monster, and almost all of them deserved the punishment they were experiencing. Beatrix found no danger here (really she didn't), and moved on to more suitable grounds—like the royal sewers.

Sewers aside, Beatrix found nothing of immediate concern within castle walls. There had been one false alarm, though. Hearing her majesty screaming, Beatrix rushed upstairs with her sword drawn, expecting an attacker or worse. She moaned in disappointment when she discovered that the “attacker” had been Zidane, and he had been chasing the squealing Queen all around. Beatrix decided that it was better to not chastise the boy for his actions, and left to resume her rounds.

Secretly, though, she wished there was somebody out there who would chase her...

Losing sight, can't breathe, soiling myself on the soot and mud beneath me. Breathe, claw, crawl, fight... HUUUUHHHH?? I cannot go on, must proceed, do it for the people who died. The many, many, many, many people who died... Many-many... so many... streets flooded with blood and maybe a slight droplet of rain. Nasty weather.

Crawling across the ground. Grass sure feels sweet in my grasp, but I can't eat it. Starving to death. Wish I could eat grass. Found a foolish cricket for dinner, ate a locust. They're not so bad. An ant bit me and I giggled.

Must go on. Don't know why. Losing sanity. Haven't eaten in years. Seems that way. Throat's dry; when was the last time I had something to drink? Last week? Maybe. Dirt feels dirty. Slippery, the weather's being nasty again. Rain mixes in with me own blood. I'm so hungry I could eat a rock.

Blind. Keep clawing, or else you will die. Maybe that not so bad, death... I'd be free. Me free. I keep going on, don't know why. Slipping, physically and mentally. Emotionally, I'm already six feet under—no, worse, I've been cremated. Scatter my emotional ashes across the sea and let the whales eat it up. I will still claw at the ground like a dog. I will still

burn my knees in a crawl. I will still cry and laugh at the same time, and I will still breathe.

Don't have to go to the bathroom anymore. Losing. I'm... losing. Ha!

Stepping to the outer courtyard, Beatrix greeted the guards and headed for the left tower first. Nothing. Now the right tower. Also nothing. *How bland*, noted the knight. *This land can certainly become boring when there are no wars or strife. But I don't want to think about that. It is during peace where we prosper and love the best.....Why did I just think about love? I'm lonely.*

Still lost in her thoughts, Beatrix boarded the boat for Alexandria's town section, and saluted the boatswain. Carefully she sat down, resting Save the Queen against her soldier. She calmly closed her eye and listened to the quiet rippling of the waves. The smell of the moat, she noted, was exceptionally delicious today.

Alexandria Town was as peaceful as things got. With perhaps the exception of a few thieves and bandits that were easily dealt with, Beatrix found no trouble or strife in the town. People were out enjoying the day, walking pets, playing cards, running around, and basically living life as it was

meant to be. Despite her boredom, Beatrix couldn't help but smile.

Taking a brief rest underneath the statue of Madeline, Beatrix let out a gusty sigh. She began recalling the “good old days”, when she would defend Brahne and all who opposed her. Of course, those days had also been filled with darkness, for Beatrix had often killed many innocent people because they supposedly opposed the Queen. That, she noted, had not been her finest hour.

The screaming she heard was just the local children playing tag. If Beatrix had not been brought up in such a strict regiment, she would have retired for the day and joined them, though she knew it would have made her look foolish. Still, she yearned for a vacation, but with the recent attacks, she knew it was not only preposterous but impossible. Duty, she noted, was her middle name (actually, for what it was worth, it was Francine).

Stepping away from the statue of the hero, Beatrix decided to do a cursory check of the outside area. There would often be a stray monster or three that had wandered into the area, and even though some beasts could be handled by the weakest of the Pluto Knights, Beatrix was obligated to check.

I fell, down a sloping ravine, and got dust and dirt and soil on my clothes. My body became riddled with injuries, but all I did was smile as I tumbled. I think I sang, too. I merely welcomed the punishment, happily staring up at the ground (whenever I could) as I tossed into the valley.

With a dusty THUMP, I fell onto the floor and did not move for a very long time. I was wide awake, though—I knew this because I was laughing and crying as I laid there. My sanity was almost gone, and so was my life, and all I could do was laugh and cry and breathe.

I actually stood up despite my shredded legs, and fell back down to the muddy ground in a dead heap. Sighing, I crawled on the ground like a worm, feeling the juicy soil squish beneath my body as I wriggled across it. Mud felt deliciously good in my fingers, and I was so hungry I almost stuffed the dirt into my mouth. Food... what did food taste like again?? I did not know.

Continue. Don't pass out. Keep focus. Rubbish! Lose yourself! Close your eyes and greet the evening sky, and the eternal rain that tickles your face. Don't concern yourself with the scavengers surrounding you. They will put you out of your misery—

eventually. It will hurt at first, this thing called death, it will hurt because they are going to eat you even as you live. But if you tilt your head back and expose your throat, they will rip it out and you'll be dead in a snap.

Whatever you do, don't fight them. You've fought your very soul out of your own body. There is no way in Heaven or Hades that you can beat them back. Don't even try. Tilt your head back and enjoy the blissful gray clouds above you. They're so beautiful, like heavenly mines of silver and tin. Don't fight. Don't reach for your weapon. Don't live. Don't listen to me, please—you have to warn them. One plus one is two, two plus two is four...

The return trip to the castle was as uneventful as the departure. Beatrix did, however, encounter most of the Vivis, who were swapping stories at the moment. She engaged them in a tale of her own for a brief time, but left quickly after the group disbanded. Waving good-bye to the adorable clones, she sighed and decided to have a late lunch. After eating, she would return to the castle and report to the Queen, then maybe she could rest.

Lunch was bland and cold and altogether tasteless, though Atma had told her that if anything

lacked flavor it couldn't taste *bad*. Beatrix sighed upon recalling her old master's name, and lost herself in a thought as she held her sandwich. *Master Atma... where are you right now? You left so suddenly, you vanished without a trace... but then again, you were always like that. Wherever you are, dear man, I miss you.*

Smiling just barely, Beatrix finished her sandwich, downed her drink, and left the atrium without a word. As usual, Alexandria was bustling with activity in the middle of the day, and with the exception of the rare mugger, there was nothing amiss in the peaceful town. Beatrix moaned as she realized that her rounds would reveal nothing, and made it back to the castle with only peace to report.

Slipping, sliding, wheezing, dying... I can't believe I killed so many. I thought I had given my all back there. I thought I had fought my soul out, I thought I had fought until my eyes became encrusted with sweat and blood, and my nose clogged with stink, and my ears deaf from the screaming. My hands went numb, and my feet froze.

I'd like an explanation on how I killed off those scavengers, but I shall never receive one. Nobody knows what I did and I think I may forget the

experience. I just hope I never forget how I arrived in this position. Mind's slipping like sand through a sifter. Can't think straight; soon won't be able to think at all. Smiling.

Claw. I can no longer feel the ground beneath me. Blood. Mine or theirs? A mixture. A divine, funny mixture. Perhaps I can eat grass after all. I'm so hungry I would eat my own clothes if I could. I would gorge myself on the cloth protecting me, and crawl towards my goal naked and plump.

I must look like I had just trudged through Hell, and in a masochistic rave gone back for more. I think I did. Hell Number One was fighting back there, in my home. THAT was hard. I might have died then, and maybe my body doesn't know it yet. Hell Number Two is this insane journey I'm taking. Where am I going again? I'll know if I get there. Ha, if! Hungry. Dead. Breathe. Claw. I think I see it.

No, it's night. Keep crawling, though. I may actually make it. Please kill me.

Beatrix had a dreamless sleep and woke up before the sun. Smelling slightly from her romp, the lady stepped into her bathroom and disrobed. She even removed her eye patch, something that she had only done once before in her entire life (outside of

bathing). Smiling just faintly, Beatrix examined her naked body in the mirror and nodded in approval. Very few women had this kind of figure, and even fewer used it well.

Rubbing her right eye, Beatrix shut her left so the blurriness would come back in this unused one. Nobody, not even the Queen herself, knew the secret behind that patch of hers. Well, there was Master Atma, but *he* certainly wasn't telling anyone. Finally, after significant rubbing, her right eye lost its blurry vision and resumed full activity. Rarely did Beatrix ever see the world through both her eyes.

The shower was nice and long, mostly because the knight thought she deserved something special for her “pains” yesterday. After drying herself and dressing, she took a deep breath and prepared for her rounds again. Beloved Save the Queen soon found its way back into its sheath.

Beatrix stepped out of her room and began by looking through the great hall and the queen's room. A shriek of delight and a mad cackle of glee told her that all would be peaceful and right that day...

Claw. Claw. Left hand. Right hand. Raise the knee. Push. Scrape it. It's filthy and bleeding—TERRIBLE!!...Don't give up, don't die—SO MUCH

BLOOD!!!...Keep living, keep breathing—KILLED US ALL!!!...Do I even want to go on?—KEPT COMING!! I have..... friends... here—ARMIES OF DOOM!...Friends who... may benefit... from my... dying—KILLED US ALL!!!...My dying words... SAVE US, HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA... Breathe. Claw. Live. Die.

One... final... effort... H... E... L... P... My hand fell into something wet, and I sang a song I had learned as a toddler before the ink covered my eyes. Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do...

Sighing, Beatrix emptily wandered outside of the castle. Her vague eyes briefly scanned over the area, far too lazy to even bother looking for trouble. The poor knight was both tireless and utterly exhausted at the same time. She wanted some action, or at least some break from the boredom, but she was so tired she barely moved at all. Contradicting herself, Beatrix prayed for a bed and a battle.

Sighing, she skipped looking over the courtyards and moved onto the moat. The faster she walked through Alexandria, the faster she could make a report and go back to bed. She knew that she should have scorned herself for such thoughts, but nothing was happening! Nothing was going on! There were

no crises, no emergencies, nobody screaming for help... To be frank, there was no use for her sword nor her services...

Absently stepping off of the boat, Beatrix ambled into town like a zombie. At first she didn't notice the body strewn on the pavement, though a brief glance over to her left immediately brought it to her attention. With a scream, Beatrix rushed towards the fallen figure, hoping against hope that A) It was alive, and B) It was not who she thought it was. The figure's pale hand was drooping in the moat, and dragonflies were perched on it. Shooing them away, Beatrix rolled the body over and shrieked as she recognized the face.

“Oh dear Lord!” she screamed. “Freya!!!”

The patient sat there in the emotionless light, just staring at the wall in front of her. She had been that way ever since she was healthy enough to sit up—in other words, for one whole entire day.

Beatrix had done well by bringing the unresponsive Freya inside the castle. Barking orders left and right, she called in the fastest and most skilled mages and doctors. Though confused, the

help nevertheless came once they saw the injured woman, and through some great fanatical miracle they were able to pull her from the brink of death. Freya's injuries were horrible at least; at the worst, they had been ghastly.

According to the doctor's report, no living being should have received the wounds she had and then lived long enough to crawl to Alexandria—not even Freya. No medical explanation could have shrugged it off, so the only conclusion drawn was that the Burmecian's will to live must have gotten her that far.

Freya thankfully kept unconscious all throughout the operations. Her body had been severely burned by fires and scarred by razors. Multiple bumps and bruises indicated that, aside from the Herculean journey she had underwent, she must have been treated like a heavy bag. Her fur (the parts that weren't burned, that is) was matted from sweat and absolutely drenched in blood—most of it belonging to her.

Yes, Freya had suffered greatly, and the journey from wherever she got the wounds to Alexandria must have been excruciating, to say the least. Yet somehow she had managed to drag her way there

and carve the letters “H-E-L-P” into the muddy banks of the moat. Beatrix was hailed as a hero for responding so quickly, and because of her efforts and the constant work of medics and healers, Freya was able to pull through.

But the very moment she could sit up, all she did was sit and stare at the wall in a catatonic state. At first this action was dismissed, but after ignoring lunch and dinner, doctors were becoming concerned. Freya kept her vacant stare all throughout the night; not once did she ever move, not even to bat at the occasional fly. Even her tail, normally a constantly-moving appendage, stayed completely and utterly still. She responded to nothing, not even food, and continued to stay in her frozen state for a whole day.

Not knowing what the problem was, and wanting to help out as much as possible, Freya’s closest friends were gathered together to see if they could snap some sense into her. Quina came in first and joked around, but even when s/he tripped and fell on a hopping frog, there was no response. Not even the adorable Vivi clones were able to wake her out of her trance.

Garnet made no progress at all, even as she pleaded and begged for Freya to tell her what had

happened. The only response she got was silence, and perhaps a blink of the woman's eye. But not even the Queen of Alexandria could catch Freya's attention, so all other eyes turned towards Zidane. Cocky and confident that his charms "could snag any pretty lady", Zidane marched into the room with a smile on his face.

"What's up, pretty lady?" he greeted. Freya continued staring ahead at the wall. She had not moved ever since yesterday, not even to bat her eyes. Zidane continued to smile and leaped up on the bed next to her.

"So," he said, sneaking his arm around his shoulder (she hated it when he did that), 'how have you been?' Silence. "That good, huh? Say, uh, Freya? I couldn't help but notice your rather... dramatic entrance yesterday. Now I know that the trip between Burmecia and Alexandria, or wherever you came from, is a tough journey. I know I sure had a hard time going between the places! But come on! Why did you look all beaten up, huh? And why did you spell out 'help' in the mud? Is there something wrong?"

Dead silence; empty stare. Freya resembled a ghost of her former self, staring at that wall, but she

made no movement, not even as Zidane rudely snapped his fingers in front of her face.

“I’m only trying to help,” he sniffed. “Come on! Snap out of it already! Please, Freya? *Please?*” Again, nothing. Zidane sighed and rested his head on her shoulder. Freya would *only* allow Sir Fratley to do that, *no exceptions*. Under any normal circumstances, Zidane would have been turned into chopped liver.

The dragoon didn’t even breathe.

Zidane swallowed and slowly backed away from his friend. She had *never* been like this: not when her people were slaughtered in Burmecia, not when Cleyra was obliterated, not when Fratley supposedly died (or came back an amnesiac, for that matter), not even when Kuja went on his multiple rampages. Sure, she had her depressed and despondent moments, but this..... This went beyond anything he had ever seen.

Sighing, Zidane took Freya’s furry hand into his own, and patted it gently.

“Hey, if you ever feel like talking again, you know who to talk to, all right?” No response. He

sighed and leaped off the table, and left the room where she was paralyzed in.

“No go,” he said as he left. The small assortment of friends moaned in disappointment.

“Now what we do?” asked Quina. “She never like this before!”

“Yeah...” said a Vivi. “It’s like her soul was removed from her body or something...”

“U-um, maybe...” stuttered another. “Uh, m-maybe we should leave her alone...”

“No, there is still one more person she hasn’t spoken with.” Everyone turned around, seeing Freya’s savior step into the room.

“But General Beatrix, I don’t think Lady Freya considers you a friend,” said Garnet. Beatrix shrugged and pushed the hair out of her eye.

“Right about now, that doesn’t matter,” she replied. “If my appearance will snap her out of things, then so be it.” And without another word from either party, Beatrix stepped into the room and shut the door behind her.

“Hello, Freya.” Beatrix spoke gently and softly, and slowly approached the catatonic dragoon.

Sighing somewhat, Beatrix examined her one-time enemy. Freya certainly looked the same since the last time she saw her. She still had that light-gray fur covering her mousy body, and she still had that silvery hair covering her emerald eyes. There was the omnipresent rosy-red vest of a dragoon over her body, and the large pointy hat covering her upper face and head.

Beatrix grimly noticed that Freya's Dragon's Whisker spear was leaning against the wall. It had arrived strapped onto Freya's back, and even though it was a sacred weapon, blood had been caked on the tip of it. She swallowed as several faded stains remained on the tip.

Sighing, Beatrix pulled up a chair and sat across from Freya. The knight stared into Freya's partially-hidden eyes with as much kindness as she could. The two warriors were usually not the best of friends, having fought each other thrice before, so it was understandable that some enmity remained between them.

"Freya," said Beatrix softly. She swallowed and cleared her throat. "Is... is there anything I can do? Anything I can do... for you? Is there any way I can get you to snap out of this vacant trance? Is there

any way you can tell me why you came here all bruised and battered? Is there any way you can tell me why somebody or something needs ‘help’?” A disturbing silence followed. Beatrix sighed, hanging her head just enough so that her hair fell.

“Freya, I want to protect this kingdom from anything and everything. If you came to Alexandria because of something dangerous, then I want to know what it is. Please, let me help you out... What is the problem?” Beatrix gently whispered, staring into Freya’s grassy-green eyes. The other knight merely blinked, but did nothing else. Beatrix sighed, and was just about to give up on the situation.

“You...”

“Huh?” Beatrix jerked backwards, the sudden creakiness of the voice startling her. The accent was Burmecian, and since there were only two individuals in the room, she only assumed that Freya was finally ready to talk.

“What about me?” asked the General. Freya’s eyes twitched, the green orbs bouncing around madly. Slowly, her left hand began to curl up in a fist.

“It’s all your fault.”

“Huh?” Beatrix expressed genuine puzzlement, and made a face to go along with her emotion. “What do you—”

“IT’S ALL YOUR FAULT!!!!!!!!!!” Freya suddenly became violently animated, leaping off of her bed and grabbing her spear. Beatrix could not even blink as the woman took the weapon and stormed after the knight. The mighty Whisker sliced through the air, and would have killed Beatrix instantly if the knight didn’t have her head (or sword) with her. A ferocious clanging sound shattered the silence, and Freya screamed out in a rage as her weapon met Save the Queen. A maniacal fire burst forth in her eyes, and she screamed again.

“IT’S ALL YOUR FAULT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” The weapon in her hand lunged again, just barely nicking Beatrix’s shoulder. The tiniest of scars came forth as the weapon missed, but Freya’s sudden outburst raved forward into an uncontrollable rage. Again and again the dragoon attacked Beatrix, screaming louder than the most powerful sirens in the world.

Beatrix blocked the spear blow for blow, but she found herself being beaten back as Freya continued her vicious assault. Again and again, the spear came at her, narrowly missing a kill by centimeters. Each

blow forced Beatrix back, and the knight began to grow weak from such a powerful and fanatic attack. Never before had she ever felt such fury, or such intensity, even from the most challenging of opponents.

“IT’S ALL... YOUR... *FAULT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*” Freya screamed so loud that the very walls crumbled, but Beatrix could only wince as the scorching accusations pierced her ears. Freya continued to hack away at the knight, a thousand times more demented or powerful than any berserker.

Finally Freya grinned a sadistic smile and plunger her weapon forward, first smacking Beatrix with the pole end, then plunging the tip into her side. It dug in joyfully, cutting cloth and flesh alike. Beatrix choked and gagged as the injury ate at her side, and staggered in pain as fresh blood spouted out of her like water from a hose.

The maniacal Freya stood there, wheezing and panting in a sickening glee. Her teeth were bared and her lips snarled, and a crazed look was permanently etched on her face. She made the most horrible sound when she breathed, something far worse than the screech of a cat during mating

season. Beatrix merely groaned, completely helpless against this mad woman...

But just as soon as it started, Freya's madness broke, and her spirits went with it. Tears came to her eyes and fell down her furry face, and a clanging sound broke the brief silence as she dropped her spear. Freya quivered, a helpless squeal coming from her mouth as she collapsed on the floor.

"No," she wailed, her voice so weak and frightened that it scared Beatrix. 'No,' she repeated, "it is my fault. It is all... my fault..." And with that, the strong Burmecian finally caved, and fell to the floor in a whimpering heap. Curling up into a helpless, hopeless little ball, she continued to whisper: "It's all my fault, it's all my fault, it's all my fault, it's all my fault....."

Gingerly, Beatrix touched the bandages that covered her injury. Were it not for the door being broken down by her friends, she might have lost much more than blood that day. Of course, once her friends came to the rescue, a million and two questions were asked, but neither warrior was in suitable shape to reply. Placing their queries aside, Zidane and Quina lifted Beatrix, and the Vivis took

Freya; Garnet concentrated on healing her bodyguard first and foremost.

All of that had taken place four hours ago. By this time, Beatrix's wound had healed considerably, although the emotional and mental scars could take a little longer. She hummed to herself and touched the wound again, and started to wonder what was going on. A few seconds passed, and one of the Vivis entered her room.

"U-umm, Miss Beatrix?"

"Yes?" The copy of Vivi paused and adjusted his hat.

"U-umm, Dagger—I mean, Garnet says that you can come in now. Freya's ready to talk."

"Thank you," sighed the General. The Vivi clone nodded his head, and waddled out of the room silently. Groaning from her injury, Beatrix managed to stand up and limp out of her room. Freya had been placed next door.

Silently, the General limped into the room, her hand still clutching her side. Inside the room was Zidane, who had taken care of Freya, and Garnet, who had been talking with her. Quina was also there, serving up a steaming pile of soup which Freya had

not touched yet. S/he tenaciously remained inside, though, insisting that “soup cures what magic cannot!”.

“Hello,” sighed Beatrix, giving a faint wave. Only Zidane smiled as she arrived.

“Hey, you’re looking well!” Beatrix smiled lightly, and limped her way inside; Freya still seemed to cling onto parts of her vacant state, even though she was somewhat more animated now.

“I leave soup here,” said Quina, wisely deciding to let the four of them remain in the room. Sure enough, s/he put the steaming bowl on the table and marched outside. Few people regarded the absence; all eyes were trained on either Freya or Beatrix.

“Uh.....” Beatrix swallowed, completely lost as to what she should say. Freya moved just slightly, though not by much.

“I..... have much to answer for,” she sighed. Beatrix merely shook her head.

“I’m not going to force you to talk if you—”

“No,” interrupted the dragoon. She sighed sadly, and turned her head towards the knight. Beatrix almost cried as she saw the completely empty look

on Freya's face. Perhaps Vivi was right. Perhaps her soul *had* been taken out of her body. The ghastly look that Freya had on her face would have made even Amarant uncomfortable.

"I..... have much to answer for," repeated Freya softly, her voice so frail it would have broken from a single touch. The dragoon sighed, and gingerly turned towards Beatrix. 'I cannot hope for your forgiveness,' she said sadly, "for even though I had lost my mind briefly, my actions were inexcusable....If you feel the need to execute me after I explain myself, then I shall not stop you."

"No, it's okay," said Garnet gently. She touched Freya's shoulder, and Zidane was kneading her hand. The Burmecian mumbled something sadly, but continued her speech.

"I suppose that everyone is wondering why I arrived here on the brink of death," she began. "Well... I... really do not wish to say it, but..... the future of Alexandria may be at stake. I... will tell you... why I came, and why I was so close to..." With a sigh, she paused, and hung her head in shame. The large hat that adorned her head came off, and her silky-silvery hair fell down freely.

“A short while ago, Burmecia was attacked,” she began, her voice just barely on the edge of tears. “These enemies... could not have chosen a worse time to invade....As you are aware, the recent battle with Kuja has inflicted great casualties on the people of my home. I..... truly am sorry for blaming General Beatrix for all this...”

“No, I willingly take responsibility,” stated the General. “If I had not been so blind, Burmecia might have been spared so much pain and horror.”

“Even so...” murmured Freya quietly. She swallowed, and somehow managed to continue. “... With Burmecia poorly populated, there was almost no defense to counter against this invasion. Nearly every man, woman, and child were wiped out, and I don’t know what happened to the few who escaped. As for his majesty.....”

“You don’t have to say it,” whispered Garnet gently. She stroked Freya’s shoulder, and quietly figured out why the Burmecian King had not been at the last Council of Gaia. *Invasions will certainly curtail one’s priorities*, she thought grimly.

“Thank you, highness,” shuddered Freya. Her hand went to her face, rubbing it several times in despair. She continued, though her voice grew

weaker with every paragraph. ‘Fratley and I stayed behind to fight the invaders,’ she said, a bit prouder. “Oh, you should have seen us! We fought so bravely! We gave it our all to defend our land! I myself have fought my very soul out... and Fratley... he *truly*... gave everything he had... He... really and truly gave...” Freya finally choked on her words, sniveled once, and covered her face with her hands. In the silence, Beatrix could hear the woman sobbing gently.

“I see,” said Garnet in an almost-inaudible voice. Zidane hissed quietly, and let a curse fall out of his enraged mouth.

“That’s... barbaric...” Freya continued to sniffle, and buried herself in her tears and the bed she had been laying on. Through her creaky voice, she somehow managed to give out the rest of the information.

“I kept on fighting until I could no longer move,” she wailed. “But... I retreated, like a coward. I should have stayed, and fought to the death, like.....” She choked again, and resumed her mourning for at least another minute. Both Zidane and Garnet held her wailing body in their arms, and

the comfort of two dear friends was just enough to help Freya continue.

“I left Burmecia, and slowly made my way here,” she whispered. “I knew that if I could just reach this kingdom and warn the people of the invasion, then I could die happily and be with..... Well, here I am, alive but not well, and now you all know why I arrived here so destroyed and torn apart. And now... now you must answer a question for me.”

“Anything,” whispered Garnet, her delicate hands massaging Freya’s back. The knight paused, and eventually collected herself. Tears still scarred her face, and her voice was still creaky, but the embers of Freya’s spirit had not turned into ash just yet. She sighed quietly, taking a deep breath to collect herself, and swallowed her despair.

“What will you do now?”

To be continued...

3. Vengeance

Part Three: Vengeance

Silently, Freya continued to stare at the wall, an understandably shell-shocked look on her face. Now that her actions had been explained, the people in the clinic began to realize why she had acted the way she did. The intense fighting she had submitted herself to must have been brutal, and to see one's hometown suffer (again) would have broken anyone's mind.

But to have one's beloved give their everything in the fight, only to have to retreat in shame and cowardice, would shatter even the strongest spirits. Add the fact that Freya traveled all the way from Burmecia to Alexandria by herself, with all the physical and emotional trauma on her back, and it was no wonder she had lost her mind. That catatonic state that she had been in was probably the best thing she could have done in response.

Lashing out at Beatrix was received with... mixed emotions. Sure, Freya had lost her mind during her strenuous journey, and perhaps it was expected of her to go a little mad. And maybe she

did still hold something of a grudge against Beatrix—after all, the General *had* assisted Brahne and Kuja in invading the kingdom.

Many warriors needlessly died in that conquest, and countless others perished as Cleyra was destroyed. Beatrix knew that that was when the Queen pushed things too far, but she knew that Freya was right when she claimed “it was all [her] fault”. After all, had she not been so blinded or bound by duty, she *could* have prevented both massacres.

But perhaps most heartbreaking of all was when Freya blamed herself. Of course, everybody disagreed, even Beatrix. “There was really nothing you could do,” Garnet had said. “Like you said, only Fratley and yourself were there to fight.” But Freya knew better than that. She continued to insist that if she had stayed to fight, Burmecia might have thrived despite the bad hands it had been dealt. Now, though she was alive physically, Freya was dead already in every other way.

The time—Two weeks after Freya was discovered unconscious; one day after she informed Garnet of Burmecia’s condition.

The place—Alexandria Castle infirmary.

The players—Lady Freya Crescent, dragon knight of Burmecia; General Beatrix, holy knight in service of Queen Garnet til Alexandros 17th.

The status—Grave.

“Something must be done,” said Garnet softly. She turned towards Freya, who still kept that empty stare of hers. With some exceptions, the knight had not moved much at all—but given what she had been through, it was all understandable.

“Well, what can we do?” asked Zidane. “You heard what Freya said. Burmecia’s been invaded by, like, a gazillion or so enemies, and not even her or Fratley could beat them back. What do you want to do, send an army there?”

“I... suppose I could,” said Garnet. Beatrix grunted softly, and saluted gently.

“My Queen,” she addressed, “forgive me for saying so, but I have a feeling that if we leave Alexandria unprotected, she may be invaded again. Do you recall what happened when Steiner and myself went to quell that incident at Mogret Central?”

“Yes...” said the Queen, “but... we defeated those enemies already.”

“Even so, highness,” replied Beatrix, “with the Pluto Knights gone, we are at a disadvantage. I feel that if we sent out more soldiers, the kingdom would be easily overthrown, even by a minority force. I would advise against sending an army out.”

“Well, shoot!” cursed Zidane. “She’s right, but what’re we gonna do about Burmecia? I mean, we can’t just leave it alone, and who knows!? The invaders might come *here* if we leave them alone long enough!” Beatrix, though the situation was grim, could not help but smile at the boy’s reasoning. Sometimes (though not too often), his intelligence surprised her.

“You are right, sir,” she said. ‘We must do something, and perhaps we should do it with haste.’ Turning so that she was facing both Freya and the Queen, Beatrix balled her fist up and covered her heart with it in her normal salute. “I swear on my heart and soul that we—no, *I* will find some way to rescue Burmecia from these horrible invaders.”

“But, what can you do?” asked the Queen. She suddenly gasped in horror, quickly realizing what her guardian had in mind. “Oh, Beatrix, no!! Surely you’re not—”

“Yes, I am, excellency,” replied the knight softly. She kneeled, hanging her head in abject humility. “With your permission, my liege, I volunteer to travel to Burmecia alone and wipe out these invaders with my own two hands.”

“But... that’s insane!” gawked Zidane. “The remnants of the Burmecian population couldn’t hold back the enemies, so what makes you think that you can do it alone?”

“I must make amends for the unjust deeds that I have committed,” replied Beatrix softly. She swallowed, and added, “Even if I die, I may redeem my actions by helping a land that I once destroyed. Please, sir Zidane, your excellency, please let me do this...” Sighing, Garnet shook her head, knowing full well that any orders against her going would only result in sadness and guilt (on both their parts) and perhaps more pain along the way. She knew that it was suicide to attack an entire invading force alone, and not even Beatrix could have accomplished this impossible feat, but if her bodyguard was so intent on redeeming herself, there was little Garnet could do to stop her.

“I suppose,” sighed the Queen, “that if you truly have your heart and soul set on this, then there is

little I can do to stop you. Very well, you..... have my permission...” Garnet sighed in defeat, knowing right then and there that she had signed Beatrix’s death papers, and in permanent red ink to boot. Even so, Beatrix could not help but smile as she stood to her feet.

“Thank you, your majesty!” she beamed. “Thank you! I swear by the Master of this world that I shall fight to the best of my abilities, and bring these monsters to the cold justice they deserve!!” Garnet barely managed a weak smile, and stepped forward to do something that she had never, ever done before. This action surprised, and possibly even shocked Beatrix greatly... but she welcomed it all the same.

Garnet stepped forth to hug her bodyguard.

“Please, General,” she whispered softly, “please come back safely. Please...”

“I...” Beatrix stuttered, unable to believe that her Queen actually had her delicate arms around her. She couldn’t even remember the last time somebody really hugged her, let alone how it felt. The feeling, though very new and unexpected, was actually pretty good.

“I... ah... can make... no guarantees, my liege,” managed the knight. She tried to smile, but the suddenness of Garnet’s actions threw her emotions completely off balance. She wanted to return the action, but by the time she had summoned up the nerve, Garnet had released her. Zidane, however, was another story.

“Aw, she’ll be okay!” he exclaimed, putting his arm around her shoulders. Smiling that same old goofy and silly grin, Zidane stared right into Beatrix’s good eye and secretly hoped for a kiss. All he got was a roll of said eye, a groan, and a civil brushing-off that the General gave him. Garnet, polite as always, chuckled softly and bade her General farewell.

“Beatrix.” Said knight turned around, seeing the dejected Freya lift her head. A depressing look was on her face, so horrid that it made even the toughest people want to burst out in tears. Beatrix almost did—almost.

“Good luck.” The knight smiled just faintly, and saluted Freya as she left the infirmary.

The Red Rose fleet had been taken by Steiner and the Pluto Knights, and all the other airships were either under repairs or broken (*But what else is new?*)

grumbled Beatrix to herself), so the holy knight had to settle for the next best thing: the cargo ships of Dali.

Now it was a pure blessing that Dali and Alexandria were so close together—in fact, the small town was walking distance away. Still, Beatrix rented a chocobo for her journey. She wanted to be as fresh as possible for the upcoming battle, and to expend even the small energy it took to walk from the two areas would have been a waste.

Letting the chocobo go, Beatrix stepped into the small burg of Dali, a peaceful and quiet city that had seen its heyday pass a year or so before. At one time, this had been the unquestioned capitol of Black Mage production, but now things were back to normal, at least for whatever passed as normal on Gaia.

Wasting no time, Beatrix took the brief walk from the town to the observatory mountain. It was here where the cargo ships usually docked, and one usually had to get a pass from old Morris before they were allowed permission to ride. As a bodyguard of the Queen, Beatrix didn't need a pass; she was one of the few people who could travel without that sort of visa.

Beatrix was about to knock on Morris' door, when an unearthly screech shattered the serenity of the mountaintop observatory. Curious as to what could cause such a ruckus, Beatrix dared to press her ear against the door.

“What do you MEAN, the airship isn't here yet?!?!” screeched the voice. “Don't you realize how long I've been waiting?! Don't you realize who you are *talking* to?! DO YOU EVEN CARE!!!???”

“Settle down now, missy,” came another voice. Beatrix grumbled as she recognized both talkers; the latter speaker was old Morris, the transportation guide and manager of the cargo ships.

“UGH!!!” grunted the first voice. Beatrix grumbled as she recognized it, and decided that now would be a good time to make herself known. With three polite but sharp knocks, the General rapped on the door and was allowed inside.

“Oh, it's *you!!*” shrieked the voice that Beatrix heard. The knight couldn't help but groan in misery as she shook her head.

“Hello, Lani,” she managed. “What brings you here?”

“Oh, umm, I needed a ride to Lindblum, and this was the best I could afford,” she explained. “And *as always*, the bloody cargo ship hasn’t come back from its rounds!”

“...I see,” said Beatrix after a pause. She turned to Morris, and summed up every last grain and speck of civility she had in her. “Kind sir,” she addressed, “if it would not be too much trouble, I would like to book passage to Lindblum as well.”

“Oh? And what business do you have there?” asked Morris.

“I need to get to Burmecia, post haste.” Morris mumbled something, and stroked his beard thoughtfully.

“Ah, yes, yes. Well, I won’t pry any further. Of course, there’s still nothing I can do about the situation, so you’ll just have to wait around like your friend here.”

“Humph!” snorted Lani. “Why of all the—”

“No, that’s okay, I can wait,” interrupted Beatrix. Lani grunted childishly, and decided to bide her time fighting the local monsters in the area; Beatrix would have coffee with Morris.

Finally, after two hours of waiting (it had been two *days* on poor Lani's part), the cargo ship arrived on the mountaintop. Screaming wildly, Lani rushed forward and got on the ship first; Beatrix boarded it with considerably more civility, and all other passengers got on before it lifted off.

First, the ship would stop at North and South gates, to make sure that everybody had the correct pass. After customs, it headed towards Lindblum, the wind pushing against it gently and the cool blue sky above the passenger's heads. Lani and Beatrix, who were normally never close, found themselves bonding rather fast as they paid multiple visits to the lady's room.....

"Finally!!" Shouting out to the ceiling, Lani stretched herself and scurried off of the cargo ship. Without wasting any time, she scampered through the Grand Castle and made her way to the tram that would take her to the Theater District. Beatrix didn't know why Lani was heading there of all places, nor did she care, as she had other businesses to attend to.

Identifying herself to the elevator man, Beatrix was granted permission to ride down to the lowest regions of the castle. There, she would take the Dragon's Gate outside and would be one more step

closer to Burmecia. Of course, she found plenty of time to rest and prepare for her journey.

It took Beatrix an hour to get completely prepared, and when she did, it was already noon outside. She figured that if she journeyed by chocobo, it wouldn't take her too terribly long to arrive at her destination—two hours at the most. This would also save energy on her part, so Beatrix was more than eager to shell out the 100 Gil for a chocobo rental.

As she left Lindblum's Dragon's Gate, Beatrix could see a Qu marsh in the distance. Resisting the urge to ask for one last ally in her quest (for she heard tales of Quale's great competence in battle), she pushed her bird farther into the wilderness, until the ground beneath her attained a soggianness to it.

Leaping off her bird briefly, Beatrix noticed that the sky was considerably darker now. The mushy ground beneath her was wet because of the endless rain that Burmecia got. It was one of the many wonders of the world, that weather, and perhaps under better circumstances, Freya might have lived a very peaceful life there with Fratley, her friends, and the king. Now, though, there was only ruin and despair.

Tightening her sword-belt, Beatrix drew out Save the Queen, whispered a brief prayer for victory, and sent the chocobo free. Carefully stepping into the wet environment, Beatrix prepared herself mind, body, and soul, and hoped to God that she knew what she was doing.

Well, she thought, there's no turning back now. Oh, well. Here goes nothing!!

Beatrix ran.

Shouting out the name of her Queen and her creed, the holy knight dashed forward into the city of eternal rain, her sword singing for joy as it sailed through the air. As Beatrix approached Burmecia, she finally became aware of just how many monsters were really there. Freya had not just been whistling Dixie when she said that they had been outnumbered: there must have been at least 500 demonic creatures here, if not more.

Beatrix ran.

Hundreds upon hundreds of monsters greeted her, snarling and thrashing about ferociously, each one a potential threat to the General's life. Nobody seemed

to notice as the white knight stormed into the dark Burmecian alleys; they just assumed her another rat for their consumption. Slowly, a token resistance gathered together to test the edibility of the knight.

Beatrix ran.

Screaming out loud, Beatrix dove into the pool of monsters and raised her sword for the first titanic blow. It crashed down on a dragon-like creature, slicing it in two. Beatrix roared and spun around, cleaving the enemies around her in a vicious circle. She bent down and jabbed the sword behind her, impaling another monster in the process. Quickly, she dug the sword out of the creature and heaved it in an upward arc to kill a swooping vulture.

Performing a backflip, Beatrix vaulted over an approaching ogre. When her feet touched ground again, she pursued her pursuer and slashed at his backside. Wasting no time, she leaped away as it swung its mighty fist, and dashed forward again to cleave its chest. Ignoring the stink it made when it died, she leaped over the body and mowed down a large group of stubborn goblins.

Three chimeras suddenly tacked her, squeezing the stuffing out from her body as they smashed into her. One raked its nasty claws across her arm, and

another burnt the tips of her hair with its fiery breath. Injured only slightly, Beatrix growled and dished out her vengeance.

Throwing caution to the wind, the knight lunged forward and dug her sword deep into the body of the nearest chimera. With a flash, she sliced the body in half and used her momentum to cleave off three heads of another chimera. Performing another backflip, she vaulted right over the third chimera and landed on its backside. Like a hunter slaying vampires, she plunked her sword deep into the third monster's back, and leaped away as it fell down and died.

Turning to examine the rest of her foes, Beatrix took a very short breather as her eye glanced over the remaining forces. There were about 492 monsters left, and she had a few bruises and several cuts on her arm. She was still heavily outnumbered, and the monsters showed no sign of retreating. Beatrix knew that coming here was suicide, and that it would take a miracle for her to even last another hour.

Beatrix ran.

Yelling fiercely, she used her sword like a baseball bat and swung the neck off of a hydra, and

leaped back as the heads snapped at her. With several more deft swipes, she decapitated the rest of the heads and strafed to the side to avoid the acidic blood it spurted. Ramming her sword behind her, she instantly ended a bat-bird's life.

A sudden shock slammed Beatrix to the floor, and when she turned, three maniacal mages were there behind her. Grinning in sick glee, one cast a fierce fire spell and burned Beatrix's foot; the second electrocuted her body with powerful lightning; the third summoned great frost to damage her wounded skin. They all blasted her together, laughing like maniacs as she cried in horror.

Pain begat rage.

"Climhazzard!!" With a bright flash, Beatrix broke free of the spells and used her secret technique to cleave through the wizards—and about fifteen other monsters in the immediate area. Panting and wheezing just slightly, Beatrix turned around to examine her find. A troop of mantises scurried forth, their scythe-like pincers resembling Death's weapon of choice.

Together, the three mantises scurried forward, slicing precisely with their arms. One cut a thin slice across Beatrix's chest; the other two created scars

across her arms and legs. In a rage, Beatrix lovingly returned the kind gestures by forcibly separating their heads from their necks. Leaping over the bodies, the knight wordlessly plunged her sword into the body of an ignorant armadillo-monster, dashing forward to face her other 470-some opponents.

Beatrix ran.

Lying in a massive heap were at least a hundred vampire bats. They screeched as they greeted Beatrix, and swarmed around the beautiful lady in massive droves. Some dove towards her with their teeth and wings; others scratched at her neck and clawed at her hair. She was able to slice a few in half, but they were all moving so fast that she was unable to keep track.

Growling, Beatrix calmed her mind and summoned another technique of hers.

“Shock!!” The bats surrounding her suddenly perished as the massive wave of indescribable power slammed into their furry bodies. The ground became littered with flying mammals, but Beatrix ignored them all and dashed forward to confront her next nemesis.

After decapitating a few trolls and getting pummeled by a few more, Beatrix was looking very much exhausted. She had bruises all over her body, and there were several streaks of red and even purple around her body. Sweat threatened to drown her as she gasped for breath, and her clothes stank of fighting and sweating and bleeding. Her limbs started to feel wobbly, and her stomach yearned to be replenished.

Beatrix ran.

Hack... slice... duck... weave... jab... cleave... cut... jump...

Three-hundred fifty-two enemies left standing.

Tumble... fall... suffer... cry... bleed... crumble... moan...

Three-hundred *forty*-two enemies left.

Scream... swear... dive... slice... Shock... dance...

Three-hundred enemies left...

Abuse... defeat... beating... cuts... scars... tears...

Two-hundred eighty-four...

Breathe... breathe... rest... breathe...

Two-hundred eighty-three...

Beatrix groaned, a hundred enemies from a hundred angles pummeling and bashing against her like she was a heavy bag. What felt like a truckload of bricks smashed against her body, scraping and cutting and smashing and beating so terribly hard... She had never faced anything so deadly, or vicious, or hopeless...

With a scream, Beatrix forced the enemies away from her. Plowing through their lines, she managed to kill a few before finding an empty space. Wheezing and gasping for air, she planted her sword in the ground and undid her eye patch. Allowing her right eye only a few seconds to adjust to the light, Beatrix used her patch as a makeshift hair band and tied her long, flowing hair into a ponytail.

Few knew this, but Beatrix's right eye worked just as well as her left. The reason she kept it behind that patch was that, in her opinion, seeing through two eyes gave her too much of an advantage. With two eyes, the battle was over too quickly, the enemies too easy, the fight too fast. Besides, it was good training for her.

But now, with both her eyes wide, wide open, Beatrix could see everything around her, clear as crystal, and she saw that the enemies didn't stand a chance.

"My turn," she grumbled darkly. With a fierce shriek, Beatrix dashed forward, cleaving enemy after enemy apart with the greatest of ease. Hack, slash, there went one; slice, dash, two more; cleave, cut, three fell down. Every time she swung her sword, Beatrix made sure that a kill followed it, and the enemies began piling up even as they charged forth.

Leaping high into the air, Beatrix hacked apart a flying dragon in midair, the came tumbling back down to impale a hapless vampire. A circular swing with her sword cleaved four surrounding enemies, and with a wicked slash, a vicious scorpion monster was laid waste. With her added advantage, Beatrix was able to see things she had previously missed, such as the club of a troll or the claws of a hippogriff.

But even then, she was being pummeled and abused and beaten. Dozens of scars found their way to Beatrix's body, some of them quite deep and wide. Her body was caked with sweat and dirt and mud and blood, and the continuous rain did little to

wash any of it off. Monsters were being slaughtered, but then again, so was Beatrix. She could not keep this fight up for long.

Beatrix ran.

Oh Great Master Atma, she prayed, give me your strength as I fight in what may be my final battle! Enable me to perform the three dreaded techniques that only you have been able to perform! With your blessings, I call forth...

“RAGE OF CHI!!!!” Beatrix’s scream echoed across the soaked alleys and streets of Burmecia, sending a quiet rumble across lands accustomed to thunders. Suddenly, an even more dreadful rumbling came from beneath the ground, and the earth shuddered violently. Beatrix paused, catching her breath as she gazed at the forbidden technique her master had taught her.

The whole entire world of Gaia groaned as the Rage of Chi was used, and a mighty earthquake belched out in response. Great, gashing stones fell from the sky, slamming monsters and demons into the gaping earth. Dozens more fell inside the yawning crevices, and were never seen again. The attack literally rearranged the architecture of all of

Burmecia, causing almost everything to collapse and crumble.

This was the price one paid for summoning Rage of Chi: though devastating, the Rage of Chi rendered the world broken and blasted, sending everything in the immediate area, save the caster, into ruin and broken destruction. Beatrix figured it was a good price to pay.

The Rage of Chi had almost annihilated every monster in the land, but there were still enough to give Beatrix troubles. Still wiped out from fighting, the holy knight concentrated on the second forbidden attack her master had taught her.

“RAGE OF TEN!!!!” Again, her scream echoed across the ruined streets, shattering some delicate glass while deafening a few other monsters. Suddenly, the great skies above rumbled and groaned, and great flashes of light scorched the skies. From God’s bowl of wrath came a ferocious bolt of lightning and thunder, smashing down on the foes like a man stomps on a berry.

Instantly the monsters were fried to atoms, vaporized right before Beatrix’s eyes. The Rage of Ten had summoned forth the forbidden powers of heaven, hurling forth a mighty bolt of light and fire

and judgment to destroy their ranks—leaving Beatrix wasted in the process, as well.

The knight collapsed, wheezing terribly as sweat poured down from her face. She lazily wiped it off, breathing so hard that her entire body shivered. Her pulse was enormously fast, and so powerful she could feel it throbbing in her head. By all definition, she was completely dead, save for the fact that her heart and lungs still worked.

The last twelve monsters paused tentatively, and took one step away from Beatrix.

“Oh, no,” she growled hoarsely. “There is no escape.” Screaming, Beatrix stormed forth, and with the very last atom of strength she had, cleaved through each and every one of the monsters like a conductor weaving his baton before an orchestra. The twelve monsters collapsed on the floor, every single one of them dead, not a single one of them living.

Beatrix herself joined them on the floor, injured beyond words or feelings, and took what seemed like two hours of rest to catch her breath. As she closed her eyes, the gentle rain washed the muck and mud off her body, and she allowed a very brief smile on her mouth as she caught her breath.

“Can’t... believe... I... did it...” she panted. She laughed triumphantly, and passed out in the soaking streets of liberated Burmecia.

There was a wet sensation that woke Beatrix out of her unconscious state. She felt something moist tickle her fingers, and as she groaned and opened her eyes, she realized that it was a stray mutt licking the blood off her hand. She moaned, and waved the mongrel away with a flick of her hand. It whined in protest, and scampered over to attend to her other wounds.

“Go away,” she grunted. The dog paused, gazing at her with innocent brown eyes, and she sighed as it obeyed her. Barely strong enough to lift her head, Beatrix laid there in the streets of Burmecia, her wounds being washed away by the everlasting rain that fell from the sky. She sighed as the droplets fell onto her face, and blinked as a few got in her eyes. Her eyes... Beatrix laughed to herself weakly, and realized what had just happened.

She had actually taken off that patch of hers. She had only done that once during battle, and that had been a grave emergency. Usually she kept it on—to

train her weak left eye, and to “level the playing field”. But now it was off, and keeping her light-brown hair out of her eyes. But taking off the patch was not the end of Beatrix’s audacity: she had also used two of the three forbidden techniques taught to her by her old master.

The Rage of Ten and the Rage of Chi attacks were both brutally powerful, but also had dire consequences for the surrounding area. The attacks tore up earth, sky, and enemy, and on some occasion, they would tear apart the user. They were both dreadfully powerful, and only reserved for the most dire of all emergencies. As Beatrix laid there in the cobblestone streets, she breathed out a thanks that she had not been desperate enough to try her third and most powerful technique. Hopefully, she would never have to use it...

Beatrix’s vision became fuzzy and bleak as she tried to stand. Only a few injuries had healed themselves in the past fifteen minutes; the rest were still throbbing and aching. The knight was skilled in white magic, but the battle had taken nearly everything out of her, so she only had enough power to use one weak Cure spell. Whispering the words that would soon heal her body, Beatrix cast Cure on herself and felt slightly better.

Although, she noted with chagrin, not all of her body had been healed. It would have probably taken a Curaga spell to *really* fix her wounds, but until she could find somewhere to rest, this would have to do. Slowly, with several wounds still singing out to her, Beatrix stood up and managed to walk. A branch of a tree served as a crutch.

Burmecia was even more haunting now that it was empty again. Previously, it had held a slew of proud warriors, scholars, and artisans. The terrible invasion that Queen Brahne had orchestrated had killed off most of their kind, and the war against Kuja and Garland took many more. It had been over a year since all that ended, so the survivors had done their best to recover.

But the best, it seemed, was not good enough. Almost as if Fate was laughing at them, the Burmecians suffered another mortal blow with this recent invasion. To Beatrix's reckoning, there were almost no survivors, save Freya and perhaps a few lucky ones. Their kind was far from extinct, although another bad hand like this would certainly push them in that direction. As Beatrix limped out of the empty streets of Burmecia, she couldn't help but think of Freya's maddening words: *It's all your fault. It's all your fault. It's all your fault.*

that my people must suffer like this. It's all your fault, so you should suffer as well.

And suffer she did—but she suffered nobly. Beatrix vowed, on her own soul, that she would find redemption by avenging the lost race and liberating their city by herself. The move was ludicrous and very dangerous, even for her, and had it not been for her long years studying under Atma, Beatrix would have been given her Judgment long ago.

The rain continued to fall in Burmecia. It never stopped, though many had to wonder where all the water was coming from, or why the city did not flood. It was one of the many wonders of the world, and Beatrix was slowly leaving it. Burmecia was now a ghost town, void of any life, be it friendly or unfriendly. Now, there were only shadows, and the ghosts of those slain, and one severely-injured holy knight who at one point had not been so holy.

Despite the ever-cloudy sky, Beatrix knew that it was getting dark outside. Even as she left the city gates, she could see the dark cloak of night covering a large portion of the land ahead of her. She had only brought one tent with her, and a lunch box, and now she was both tired and hungry. First, Beatrix knew that she had to leave Burmecia territory. It would not

do to sleep outside in the rain, so dry land had to be found first.

As Beatrix finally limped away from the soggy fields of Burmecia, thoughts of Freya entered her mind again. The first time she had seen the dragoon was in that rain-infested town; how ironic it was that this encounter led to a fight. The two fought again almost one hour later, and destiny saw to it that they had yet another encounter in an equally short amount of time.

Beatrix had to wonder how anybody could fight her three times in the span of three hours. They would have to have been a magnificent warrior, or else a stubborn one, for the holy knight was certainly no pushover. After all, she *had* been instructed by Atma. Then again, Freya had not been alone. There was Zidane, and of course that black mage, and on two occasions the royal cook was with them. Even Steiner had fought her—though tentatively. Even so, she had won all three times.

Nowadays, Beatrix knew why they fought so zealously, and how they could suffer through three battles with her and still walk away. She also knew that at that point, she had been the enemy—but *no more*. Now, she did everything in her power to make

up for those mistakes, whether it was befriending those she fought, avenging Burmecia, or else dedicating herself to truth and justice.

Freya, she noted, was not usually the best person for her to befriend. Sure, she respected her power, but Beatrix couldn't help but notice that there was still some enmity left over in the dragoon's eyes. Perhaps old memories died hard, or maybe they were just resurfaced to haunt again. Beatrix respected and even trusted Freya to a degree, and it was likewise for the other, but it always seemed to end at that—a degree, and nothing more.

The bodyguard of the Queen sighed, and pushed those thoughts out of her head for the time being. She had all the time in the world to think about Freya and other matters, but now she needed to survive and rest. Eventually, she did leave the moist ground that surrounded Burmecia, and found a nice place to camp out.

Beatrix sighed, and inhaled the soggy, foggy air of the marshlands. This would be a bad place to hang around during wet or wintry seasons; thankfully, though, the air was quite warm and dry, and Beatrix would be able to rest without too much

trouble. First she started a fire, and sat warming herself before pitching her tent.

A novice when it came to tents, Beatrix had taken one of the special “layman’s tents” that would erect itself. All she needed to do was take it out of its sack and throw it on the ground, and a tent would emerge. It was small and very cramped, and quite expensive, but since Beatrix was in service to the Queen (and traveling by herself), she could manage.

Once the tent was up and the fire had started, Beatrix took her time in cooking her food. Most of what she had brought was non-perishable, such as oatmeal, soup, crackers, and dry pasta. She was the world’s worst cook (in her own opinion), but not even Beatrix could foul up on these dishes. After filling herself on an unsatisfying meal of plain spaghetti, vegetable soup, and a roll of bread, Beatrix put out the fire and crawled inside her tent. For now, she would rest and recover her wounds, and in the morn, she would depart for Alexandria to report her success.

Sleep took over Beatrix’s body, and in no time at all, she was paying audience to King Morpheus...

It was raining, and it smelled like water and death inside the throne room. It did not stink at all—the smell of water was very delicious, like a fresh spring, and the smell of death was oh-so invigorating. There were great puddles everywhere, because it had been raining for some time, though not all the puddles contained water. In fact, some contained blood.

A knight ran forth to challenge her. She laughed; who was he kidding? How could he ever face her? But then, four more people entered the room. She, of course, recognized none of them, save for the fact that one looked like a soulless golem, another the royal cook, one was a human with a tail, and the fourth seemed native to those lands.

And in front of her Queen and the guest, she fought them. Or, to be more accurate, they challenged her. She didn't know why. Logically, there was really no reason. After all, she was just following orders. Besides, who could ever stand up to her? Nobody ever had, and nobody ever would. It would take more than these four insects to threaten her. But still, they fought.

The boy with the tail dashed forward, swinging a dagger with clumsy might. She yawned and easily

stepped aside, but instead of missing, he scored a direct hit. The blade sunk in deep, nearly touching her stomach as it buried inside her body. He snarled, and dashed away to wait for his friends. The cook laughed as it bounced forth, and made her bleed as it smashed her head with its fork.

A fork, against her? Rubbish! It would take an army to topple her!

The little one waddled forward and chanted a spell that she knew well. She figured upon avoiding it with ease, but instead, it struck her hard, right on the injury she had received. An icy hand of frost and snow stabbed further into the wound, making it sing out in agony. She sang too, a wailing tune, and crouched on the ground. How was it that these four simpletons were defeating her? How could it even be possible?

The fourth, the native, flew high into the air. She did not see this native come down, but she did know that the native descended—after all, the spear she carried had almost impaled her. It slashed at her shoulder, nearly taking the entire arm with it. The knight crumbled, racked with injuries, and slowly began to bleed and vomit and cry.

“Humph!” snorted the Queen. “Good help is so hard to find these days!” She grumbled, and ordered the man in white to finish off the foursome. By some means, he defeated them, and carried the defeated knight in his arms as he retreated. She continued to bleed and cry, and couldn’t help but wonder why she had been beaten.

“Who is that?” asked Beatrix. King Morpheus chuckled wisely.

“Come come now, my child! Do you not recognize her?”

“I fear that I do not,” admitted Beatrix. Morpheus sighed, but kept his smile.

“Well, there is something else I must show you,” he said. With a wave of his hand, Morpheus made the image of the wet city vanish, and in its place came a city where sand surrounded a tree in loving warm protection.

“I do not know this place,” said Beatrix. Morpheus smiled, and looked into her eyes—both of them.

“You will.”

There were now hundreds of golems around the tree, casting magic from their empty hands. Great flashes of fire and lightning ripped through the air; wind tore at people's bodies and shredded their skin; ice froze their hearts and their lungs. Above all the others stood the knight, still somewhat wounded from her battles.

Then she stole the crystal, and ran to bring it to her liege. Yes, with this crystal, she would be performing her duties... but again, those four figures emerged to do battle with her. This time, at least she understood their rage. After all, she had that crystal, and there were people dying even now.

The battle commenced, and the knight swore vengeance for what had happened an hour ago. She promised to skewer them all, and to hang their heads on pikes for all the world to see. But to her horror and shock, she found that she could not move, not even to avoid the blows dealt her. Again did the boy stab her, again did the cook smash her, again did the mage blast her, and again did the native slash at her body.

She crumbled and fell, and nearly died on that tree. The four of them smiled at their victory, and beat back the mages, but it was far too late. Through

some strange possible means of escape, they left the tree of sand and climbed high into the clouds. One of the golems came and saved the knight, as if she were a helpless child, then the tree died.

Defeated, the knight limped to her Queen and presented the crystal.

“Humph!” snorted the royal one. “You’re starting to disappoint me!”

“But, my liege...!”

“Enough of your excuses!” barked the Queen. “There are still two others! Walk it off, you pathetic excuse for a soldier!!” The knight sighed, knowing her liege was right as always, and limped away to recover.

“I do not know any of this,” said Beatrix. King Morpheus sighed.

“I still have one more thing to show you, my dear.” With a wave of his hand, the clouds and the sky vanished, and the sandy tree destroyed, and all images swam and swirled into the form of a castle. Beatrix paused, and scratched her head.

“I...”

“Do you remember now?” asked Morpheus. Beatrix sighed, and a large lump formed in her throat. Suddenly, everything started to make sense to her.

“Yes,” she whispered. “This is Alexandria.”

“And the knight?” asked Morpheus. Beatrix shuddered, and hung her head in shame.

“It is myself.”

The knight came into the room, spying three of the four that had beaten her. They were all gathered around, but she didn’t know why. She even recognized the Captain as one of them. She swore revenge yet again, and even though the boy with the tail stated that “we’ve heard that stuff before”, she drove on and attacked them anyway.

This time, though, the knight put up a colossal fight. Never before had any warrior ever seen (or felt) such magnificence, such grace, such unbridled power. The sword sliced through the air as it crashed down on their bodies, her hips moved and twisted to dodge every blow, and their pitiful magic and techniques missed her by miles.

But even so, even as she fought harder than any human had ever fought, even as her strength became

comparable to angels, she was unable to beat back these four weaklings. The magic became unbearably powerful—so strong it could have ripped the entire planet apart. The boy's puny dagger turned into a flaming sword, and he sliced through her body like a razor through butter.

The one she did not know—the native to the countries she had destroyed—fought even harder than she did. That great spear of hers crashed down like a tree against a gnat, and produced flaming sparks as it smashed upon her useless sword. Blood erupted in many places because of the spear, and even though the knight fought very well, in the end, she was impaled by the spear. A single thrust, and the whole entire weapon was protruding out of her body. The knight choked, coughed up saliva and blood, and fell down and died.

The one that had killed her showed no emotion at all—not happiness over victory, nor hate for the crimes committed, nor sadness for the losses suffered. She merely gazed down at the dead knight, two grassy-green eyes peeking behind a rosy-red hat and ghastly white hair. The boy with the tail checked to see if she was all right, but he was too late. She had died long ago.

“What... what is this?” whispered Beatrix. “Why are you showing me this?”

“Because, child, you might want to know what could have happened. This is just a possibility.” Beatrix swallowed, and slowly nodded her head at King Morpheus’ wisdom. Her stomach grew very cold, and she fell down to the misty floor in a pathetic heap. She began to cry.

“It’s all right,” whispered Morpheus gently. His kind hand began stroking her wood-colored hair. “It’s all right, child. It’s all in the past now. You have found redemption through your actions, and by suffering, you have purified yourself once again. It’s all right.” Morpheus took a breath, and whispered out a beautiful benediction in a language older than speech itself. It brought even more tears to Beatrix’s eyes.

“Thank you... sir,” was all she could say. Morpheus smiled, stroked her cheek, and gave her his blessing.

“Your dream is complete, child,” he said. “Now, you must wake. You must wake, child, and present what you have seen to your friends. Go now, and be at peace with yourself.” Beatrix smiled and shuddered slightly, and slowly began to leave the

land of Slumbers. As she bade farewell to the King of Dreams, a brand new feeling of respect, admiration, and honor for Zidane and Freya arose in her heart.

Groaning out softly, Beatrix opened her eyes—and shut them rather quickly. The sun was just peeking over the horizon, and she was unfortunate enough to be directly in its way. As the bright light hit her eyes, she squinted and blocked out all rays. Taking a deep breath, she sat up, stretched, yawned, and greeted the day.

“What a strange dream that was,” she muttered.

The first thing that came to Beatrix’s mind when she awoke, other than the fact that she had had a very peculiar and haunting dream that night, was that she was sore all over. As she sat up, her back whined out to her, so she plopped back down onto the bed and moaned softly. Lifting her arms to the sky, Beatrix discovered that they, too, had rebelled against her. Even her legs were starting to feel like needles of fire had been jabbed into them.

The bodyguard of the Queen sighed and almost laughed at her position. Here she was, Beatrix of

Alexandria, slayer of countless enemies to the throne, protector of two generations of Queens, owner of Save the Queen, and she was suffering from post-battle cramps. Of course, the past year or so had more or less ushered in an era of peace, so there was hardly any reason to fight.

A foolish excuse, spat Beatrix, most of the scorn being aimed at herself. She knew full well that the ideal of Peace was as constant as a cloud, and that war could break out at any time or any day (in fact, it actually had). She knew that to be unprepared was a sin, and she was receiving her just reward for not using her body.

Still, Beatrix felt like she could have stayed in bed for a few more days. The threat in Burmecia was gone, and with the exception of Steiner and herself, Alexandria had plenty of protection in case an enemy decided to run amok. Technically, she *could have* stayed to rest up. But then, that ugly old hag called Duty reared its nasty head, and stared at Beatrix as if to convict her of some unseen crime.

“All right, I’m going,” grumbled the knight to herself. Clenching her teeth, Beatrix tried to ignore the pain she felt as she stood, but it was like trying to ignore an elephant standing an arm’s length away.

Still, she managed to stand, and despite her moaning muscles, did some light aerobics in an effort to loosen them up.

Breakfast was quick, cold, and anything but delectable—but at least it was edible. After dressing into her traveling clothes, and making sure that Save the Queen was free from the blood and dirt she had subjected it to the other day, Beatrix left the tent and set about the long journey back to Alexandria. Hopefully, she could take the Dragon's Gate into Lindblum, and from there she would be able to rent an airship.

The morning was crisp and cold. The sun was slowly racing up in the sky, seemingly content to keep the world cold for a few minutes more. Mist and fog hung in the air—thankfully, though, this was natural stuff, not the byproduct of the Iifa Tree. It could still be harmful, though: the freezing morning, added into the chilling mist, made the early day not very pleasant. And poor Beatrix, who had anticipated a heat wave or two, had worn light clothes.

Cold aside, Beatrix also noted that she needed to shower, *badly*. Her body had been drenched with sweat from the fight, and there were still a few

clumps of dirt and noticeable bruises on her body. Many scars adorned her pretty features, and sleeping in a stuffy tent in the middle of a marshland certainly didn't help any. But complain she did not—instead, Beatrix began counting her blessings to pass the time.

1: I am still alive.

2: I am not very hungry.

3: I have clothes on my back and a sword at my side.

4: I am victorious.

5: Alexandria is not far away.

6:...?

Getting past Five really was a challenge, so Beatrix pushed that activity aside and concentrated on hiking towards Lindblum. From her reckoning, the chocobo ride did not take too terribly long, but on foot, she would be lucky to make it there before midnight. Besides, there were still monsters that roamed these fields, and if Beatrix was lucky, she might run into only a few. She did not want to fight many, not in her present condition.

Oftentimes, God has a sense of humor; people usually just don't get the joke. In this case, a small pack of starving wolves closed in on Beatrix as she approached the Qu Marsh. With a groan, she yanked her sword out of its sheath and prepared to do battle.

"I don't need this," she mumbled. One wolf dashed forward, fangs bared and salivating heavily. Beatrix sighed, pitying the poor mongrel as it approached her. Lazily, almost in irritation, she stepped aside and cleaved at it as it dashed onward. To say that it lived would be a lie.

Its three companions, dumb to the fact that one among them was... no longer among them, raced in and began exacting revenge. Beatrix groaned, and shook her head as the weak little puppies tried to bite at her. Even in her condition, Beatrix was more than a match for the wolves, and with a flip, a very deft slice, and a few bloody hacks and slashes here and there, the animals joined their comrade and let Beatrix pass.

"Fools," she muttered. "You could have at least posed a threat to me..."

Oftentimes, God has a sense of humor, but He will also grant the most unexpected wishes. Case in point: Beatrix. No sooner had she beaten back the

wolves did a much larger and much more dangerous threat enter into her life. A nasty hydra soon slithered from out of the marsh, and roared at her fiercely with its nine heads. Beatrix growled, and cursed herself for her wish.

The hydra immediately lost one head as Beatrix dashed forward, but two more made up for the loss by biting at her arms. Fierce, rocky teeth dug into her arm, creating a noticeable bite mark that might have been much more fatal in any other circumstance. Beatrix cried out in pain, but let her tears fall where they may and stepped forth to avenge her loss. The nine-headed hydra soon found itself having only six, and despite the flames that a few heads breathed, two more found themselves on the floor.

Beatrix knew full well that hydras regenerated their heads after a time, and that one of their heads were indestructible. But she had killed plenty of their species before, so it wasn't like she would be unable to win. Still, the vicious bite she had received was growing worse, and Beatrix's vision began to get fuzzy and blurred. She staggered about like a Treno drunk, and almost puked out what little food she had eaten. She realized with dreaded horror that she had been poisoned.

Idiot, idiot, idiot! Why didn't you... didn't you... bring... antitoxin... wiffo... with you... fool... now you're... in mess... ome kni... t you a... re... Some knight you are...

Beatrix groaned, and fell to the ground in a sick heap. She would not keep her health forever, and unless she prepared a magical antidote herself, the hydra (or what was left of it) would definitely have her for supper. But she was also still sore, and using a Cure spell and an Esuna spell would cost her precious time and energy. Beatrix moaned as her stomach felt queasy, and her lungs burned, and her arm began to tingle, and darkness almost claimed her.

Ha... what a way to go... After all I just did, to be killed by a measly hydra! Ha!

Fate, it seemed, was not too fond of Beatrix, and she collapsed on the ground in an unresponsive heap.

Beatrix didn't know what Heaven would be like (or Hell, for that matter), but she was certain that it didn't smell like boiling lizards. The smell entered into her nose and knocked rudely on the door of her stomach, and a grumbling sound caused the knight to slowly open her eyes and wake. The first thing

she noted, after a terrible wave of pain bit at her arm, was that she still lived.

And there was something cooking in the room. Steadily, Beatrix sat up and whiffed at the air with her nose. The smell excited her, and the aroma of a thousand spices and herbs filled her glands and made her stomach sing out in rapture. Something else was singing in the room, and from the sound, whatever was singing was completely tone-deaf.

“Dum ba dee ba dum ba dum...” Beatrix groaned, and rubbed her eyes as she took in her surroundings. A small fire was in the corner, keeping a kettle warm and toasty (which was probably where the food smell was coming from). The place where she was in had primitive wooden planks for walls, and smelled of mud and water and frogs and reeds. Beatrix sighed and laid back into her bed as she realized that she was in the house of a Qu.

“I wonder if you awake yet?” came a voice from somewhere in the house. Beatrix pursed her lips, and hoped against hope that the voice belonged to either Quina or Quale, or at least somebody friendly. The speaker entered the room, still humming, and

noticed that Beatrix's eyes were open. Indeed, it was a Qu, albeit a very excitable one.

"Goody-goody!" it sang. "You wake up at last! I not know when you wake up! You worry-worry me!" Beatrix let out some air, and said the very first thing that came to her mind.

"Who are you?"

"I sorry," sighed the Qu. 'I forget you not awake when I find. I not introduce myself yet, is very-very rude!' The Qu stepped forward, and extended a pudgy, pale hand in Beatrix's direction. "Am Quban," it said. Beatrix nodded her head and shook the Qu's hand.

"I am Beatrix of Alexandria," she said.

"Oh, Alexandria! Is very-very far away!" exclaimed Quban. "Tell-tell, how you get out here?"

"Oh, it's a long story," sighed Beatrix. "I'm sure you'd rather not hear it. But please, tell me, what am I doing here?"

"Ah, is long story as well," replied Quban softly. "Maybe you not want to hear?"

"Touché," grumbled Beatrix sourly. "Okay, to sum it all up, I was sent to Burmecia to liberate it

from monsters.” The Qu smiled, and nodded its head happily.

“Ah, is very brave of you, Beatrix! Many-many monsters in that area! Spoil Quban’s cooking sometimes, so very-very mad. But now I very-very happy!” Beatrix managed a smile, and nodded her head.

“Right. Now please, tell me how I came to be here.”

“Like I said, is long story,” pointed Quban. “But I try make short. See, I wander outside to look for frogs and eels for special stew, but find nothing. I hear fighting, so came to look. Found you and monster fighting, but scared at first. Monster very-very scary! You hurt monster, monster hurt you, then I see you fall down. I want help, so I fight monster! I was very-very brave!”

“I see,” said Beatrix, her smile growing larger. “That does sound brave. So, I can assume that you either killed it, or escaped.”

“I no run,” insisted Quban. “I kill monster! I take you into house after, find cure for poison. You very sick, but no problem to cure you. You been asleep many-many hours since!”

“I see,” said Beatrix again. She swallowed, and gingerly touched her arm. It still stung like all get-out, but at least the bleeding had stopped, and the scars healed. A bandage had been wrapped around it, as well as a few other scars on her body.

“So you’ve been taking care of me?”

“Yes-yes,” said Quban. “You very easy patient! I great doctor in these parts, but not good cook. Hope you like hydra stew; is my specialty.”

“Hydra stew?” repeated the knight. She made a very disgusted face, and almost vomited again. “You mean... you... *cooked* the hydra?”

“Yes-yes!” sang Quban proudly. “Hydra very-very good dish! You try sometime! I not good cook, but hydra very-very easy to make!” Sighing, Beatrix shook her head in defeat. It did smell good, and she was so hungry she could have eaten her own sword.

“I guess it’s better than starving,” she grumbled. Quban smiled happily, and nodded its head about 62,348 times.

“Yes-yes!” it sang. “Is much, much, *much* better than starving! But not ready yet, so rest for awhile. I tend to other wounds, make sure you okay. Okay?”

“Sure,” shrugged Beatrix. Quban smiled and exited the room, leaving Beatrix to lie on her bed in weak wonder. *So, I have eluded death yet again*, she sighed to herself. *Fancy that. And saved by a Qu, no less! Well, I shall definitely have to repay it sometime. But in the meantime, I will rest. Still haven’t gotten over those cramps...*

“Try! Try!” With Quban leering over her happily, Beatrix prepared her mouth for the punishment she was about to give it. Starvation, she noted, was a very *wrong* concept, but if she didn’t get anything to eat, she’d die. Taking in a deep breath, Beatrix made a face and forced the spoonful of hydra stew into her mouth.

“Well?” asked Quban. “You like?” Beatrix groaned, but suddenly her disgusted features turned into joy, and she smiled as she swallowed the stew.

“Delicious!” she sang. “Why, this is even better than piecea! I can’t believe it!”

“Told you!” chortled Quban. “I told you! Hydra stew very easy and very delicious! Have all you want; I eat later.” Beatrix smiled and thanked the Qu for its hospitality, and slowly began to eat at the delicious stew. Her hunger left her immediately, and a brief boost of power surged through her body as

the food became digested. With energy anew, she sighed in contentment and stretched her healing limbs.

“So, Dr. Quban,” she began, “when do you think I’ll be able to go back to Alexandria?”

“I not know,” came Quban’s voice. The Qu took Beatrix’s empty bowl and asked if she wanted more stew. She declined, so s/he spooned up a bowl for itself. ‘I know you very easy patient,’ continued the Qu as it left the room. “Is like watching grass grow, but you more fun.”

“Thanks,” smiled Beatrix. She sighed, and ran a hand over most of her body. The scars, she noted, had healed considerably since the last time she checked. It was now early morning, so Beatrix could surmise that she had been asleep for most of the previous day. Hydra stew was normally not her first choice for breakfast, but it certainly hit the spot.

“Oh, Dr. Quban?”

“Yes?”

“Would it be possible for me to take a shower?”
A short pause.

“Maybe-maybe. If you need to wash, take dip in lake. Very cold, so make sure you have fire ready.” Beatrix grumbled to herself at the idea of bathing in a Qu marsh lake. She had seen what kind of creatures lived in those “lakes”, and how clean the waters really were. She wasn’t sure whether the dip would help or harm her—but it was better than festering around all day.

“All right,” she said. “I’m going to take a bath now, I guess. Thank you for your hospitality.”

“Wait-wait!” shouted Quban. S/he rushed back into the room, a ladle in one hand and a squirming snake in the other. “You leave so soon? I not know if you okay! I need examine you, make sure you okay!” Beatrix’s fair face turned pale as milk as the idea of a Qu examining her naked body entered her mind. Technically, Qus were genderless creatures, although sometimes a definite male or female could be found in the mix. If Quban had been one of those rare genders, Beatrix hoped that s/he was the more feminine type.

“All right, I guess,” she sighed wearily. Quban nodded its head fiercely.

“No worry-worry,” s/he assured. “I see many-many people go by here! Many ask for my help, so I

know... well, you know!” Beatrix grumbled and managed a false smile, and tentatively began to undress. Quban sighed to itself and nodded its head several times as it briefly examined Beatrix’s body.

“You doing well,” s/he said. “Scars healing very-very fast. I good doctor, so this not hard. You be okay soon. Take bath, then come back for lunch, okay?”

“All right.” Beatrix performed a salute, but smiled sheepishly as her fist covered her heart. “Sorry, old habits die hard.”

“Is no problem,” assured Quban. “Go take bath, come back for lunch.”

True to Quban’s warning, the bath was cold—or to be more precise, it was like swimming in liquid ice. The fact that Beatrix had jumped into the pool with nothing but her eye patch on made things even worse. She dunked her head in once, and leaped out as soon as possible. A weak fire rested just off the shore, and it was here where Beatrix warmed and dried herself.

Returning to Quban’s house was like stepping inside an oven after spending an hour in Esto Gaza. Beatrix moaned with relief, and plopped down on

her bed after stepping in. Her hair was still matted down to the side, but after a trip to the cooking-flame, it dried up considerably and pneumonia escaped her.

Speaking of cooking, lunch consisted of snake soup, which Beatrix also found herself enjoying. After lunch, Quban gave her another thorough examination. By now, the bruises on her body were almost invisible, and the scars had faded into her skin. Even the tooth marks made by the hydra were almost gone. Beatrix sighed, and smiled as she approved of her health. One more day passed before she was completely recovered.

“Dr. Quban?”

“Yes?” Beatrix smiled, and hefted the small bag of provisions. Inside were all the essentials she would need, including several vials of antitoxin, tonic, and ether.

“I’m ready to leave now.”

“I see, I see!” said Quban. S/he smiled, and stepped forth to shake Beatrix’s hands. “You good friend! Come by and see Quban again! I make you special frog steak!”

“I will,” smiled Beatrix. She saluted him boldly, unsure as to how she should thank the Qu. After all, s/he had not only saved her life, but s/he had also fed her, healed her, and even befriended her. Beatrix wished that she could have stayed longer and perhaps repay Quban, but she did have her duties to think about. Waving good-bye silently, Beatrix left Quban’s house and the marsh, and resumed her journey towards Lindblum with a healthy mind, body, and heart.

To be continued...

4. Results

Part Four: Results

There was, of course, nothing going on at the moment—which, in their case, was a relief. There was no activity whatsoever: no shows were being performed, no Fan Girls were screaming after Lowell, there were no constructors going to and from work, and not even the occasional street brawl was taking place. In short, it was a very quiet, bland, and ordinary day, and “they” were taking complete advantage of it.

“You think she got lost?” asked the stouter one. The lankier one shrugged.

“Hope so.”

“You know she’s in love with you, right?”

“ACK, don’t remind me!!!” screamed the thinner one. The more obese of the two chuckled, and scratched his belly.

“Hehehe... I dunno about you, bro, but I’d rather be alone and suffering than having a girl like that tail me around.”

“Ugh...” The tall one sighed, and hung his head in misery. Just then, the shortest member of their gang (and probably the ugliest) came into the room. The three men did their traditional greeting, and nodded their heads.

“Yo, I checked all over the place,” reported the shortest one. “She ain’t around!”

“Whew, what a relief!” cried the thin one. “Thanks, man. I owe you big time for this.”

“Forget it,” shrugged the ugly one. “Anyway, we’re gonna have another meeting soon, so start prayin’ that she doesn’t get lucky and—”

“THERE YOU ARE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” The three men plummeted to the ground from the blast of the new guest’s voice, and by the time they stood and dusted themselves off, this fourth member had already scurried inside and made herself comfortable.

“Oh well,” sighed the obese one. “So much for that period of tranquility.”

The time—Roughly three days after Beatrix left Alexandria

The place—Lindblum city Theater district; Tantalus hideout

The players—Blank, Marcus, and Cinna, three Tantalus thieves; Lani, a self-centered bounty hunter

The status—Discord

“Hello, Lani,” grumbled Cinna. The fourth person in the room, and the only female thus far, smiled wickedly.

“What’s up, pug-face? God, it took me *forever* to find this place!! Do you realize how long I’ve been running around?”

“Days?” offered Marcus. Lani screamed and leaped into the air.

“Three frickin’ days!! It took me *three frickin’ days* to find this place!!!” She growled, but calmed down after a while and caught her breath. “But, it was all worth it to see my sweetie!” She smiled, and slinked over to where Blank was. Purring like a wild panther, she cozied up to him like a python around its prey.

“Uh... yeah...” muttered the poor man. His eyes turned to fire and ice as he glared at the snickering Marcus and Cinna. Suddenly, a familiar sneezing sound could be heard, and Blank pushed Lani away as the three Tantalus boys greeted Rubi and their boss, Baku.

“Hey you lugs, what’s goin’ on?” demanded their boss. Marcus scratched his neck, which usually meant that he was trying to hide something.

“Uh, well, uh...”

“What’s up, fatso?” greeted Lani. She crossed her arms and walked over to him, receiving several frightened looks all the way. Baku merely laughed at her boldness.

“Gwahaha! Yer a brave one, little girl! So did you bring me my Cyclops head?”

“LITTLE GIRL?!?!?” Lani’s high and annoying voice suddenly grew *much* higher and more annoying. “I’LL HAVE YOU KNOW THAT I AM A FULL-GROWN WOMAN AND A GREAT BOUNTY HUNTER TO MATCH!!!!”

“Gwahahahahahahaha!” chortled Baku. “Okay, keep yer shirt on—not that we wouldn’t want it otherwise!!”

“WHY YOU—!!!!” Before the enraged Lani could explode over Baku like so much lava from a volcano, Rubi stepped in to separate them.

“Now hold yer horses, y’all!” she demanded. “Boss, y’need to stop actin’ so... well, like yerself

when we've got new members! And Lani, sweetie, could y'turn the volume down just an eentsie-weensie lil' bit?"

"And what's that supposed to mean?!" spat the bounty hunter. Rubi made a face but kept her civility through some great miracle.

"Well... ah'm just sayin' that the ol' Regent hisself could prob'ly hearya from his room. I mean, bein' loud's nahce, but, well..."

"You need to shut up," insisted Cinna. Lani turned around, and in doing so, also turned her melting-hot rage from Baku to the little hammer-wielding punk.

"*What... did... you... say?!*" Cinna swallowed heavily, and would have drowned in his own nervous sweat if it were possible. He spoke again, knowing full well that any and all words would mean Instant Death.

"I... s-said th-that y-y-you... n-need t-to... ah... sh-shut up." Lani growled ferociously; no, she *roared*, and clenched her fist so hard that the knuckles turned white. Her dark-skinned face began taking on the hue of a radish, and steam literally came out her ears. Even Baku was not brave enough

to stick around the area, and scrambled out of the hideout before he could hiccup.

Immediately sensing the danger that his honest “brother” was in, Blank decided to sacrifice himself and rushed in to save Cinna. Before Lani could go berserk on the bearded man, Blank fiercely flung his arms around her body and locked his lips onto hers.

Before Lani could erupt, her fires had been cooled by her “sweetie”, and a look of pure shock came to her face as she stood there. Slowly, she realized that she was being kissed, and let out a moan of contentment as she returned the gesture. Though Blank considered the act quite unholy (he would be brushing his teeth for the next fifteen hours straight), he considered it a small price to pay in order to save his “brother”.

“Oh, am I interrupting anything?” came a voice. Blank winced and broke the kiss quickly, leaving both himself and Lani flushed and out of breath. As he wheezed for air, his flushed face turned to the color of ashes as he looked to see who had barged in.

“Uh, no...” grunted Marcus. “Not a thing, Lady B. In fact, why don’t you come in and make yourself comfy?” The one who had barged in on the group,

Lady Beatrix of Alexandria, merely smiled coyly and crossed her arms.

“Perhaps another time,” she replied. She nodded at Lani, who was still red from the sudden kiss. “I saw Baku run out of here like the place was on fire, so I had to check and see if you were all okay. You, ah, seem to be *very* ‘okay’ to me...”

“Hey, wait! It’s not what you think!” blurted Blank. Beatrix gave him a smug look and waved the hair out of her eye.

“*Sure*,” she smiled. Her grin vanished slowly, and once again she attained the façade of a businesswoman. “But in any case, I was just passing through here on my way to the airport. Trust me, I would normally never intrude, but since it looked like you were in danger, well...” She coughed in order to clear up her own slightly flustered face, and cleared her throat before speaking. “In any case, I will be leaving soon. Lani, was Baku the, ah, ‘new boss’ you were referring to earlier?”

“Y-yeah,” gushed Lani. Beatrix smiled lightly, and saluted her one-time enemies.

“It’s none of my business,” she said. “If you’ll excuse me, I will be heading back to Alexandria.

Oh, and Blank? I shall try to keep your secret a, uh... a secret.”

“Oh, man...!” Blank moaned out in agony, and hung his head. Lani giggled and rushed over to constrict him again, and Beatrix left the theater district laughing out loud.

“It’s so good to see you again!” Beatrix managed to put on a very pasty smile as she was being hugged and kissed by Lady Hilda. The older woman had been crooning ever since she saw the General. Like Garnet before her, she believed that Beatrix had gone on a journey of self-destruction, so perhaps this outpouring of affection was reasonable.

“I’m... fine, Lady Hilda,” managed Beatrix, but the other woman ignored her.

“You poor dear!” whined the woman. ‘You don’t look well at all! And... and... “She crinkled her nose, and tried her best to politely step away.” Beatrix darling,’ she said, “what is that offensive odor?” The knight’s face went red as she realized that she really hadn’t had a good shower in days.

“Oh, forgive me, my lady. I, ah, well, you see, uh...”

“You... fought very... *hard* for the preservation of peace,” offered Hilda. The faintest of all faint smiles was on her lips, and Beatrix mirrored it as she sighed with relief.

“You, ah, seem to understand my, uh, predicament, my Lady,” muttered the knight. Hilda nodded her head, and insisted that Beatrix be bathed and pampered and spoiled that very second. Though the knight had things to do and reports to make, she knew that coming to see her Queen in such filth was unbecoming a General. Besides, she figured that she had earned a little reward, so she accepted Lady Hilda’s offer.

Never, not once in her life, had Beatrix ever received the royal treatment. According to Hilda’s wishes, the knight was to “be bathed in as much luxurious comfort as myself or my husband is accustomed to”, and this is exactly what happened. For starters, dutiful maids took her soiled clothes, even her eye patch, and had them washed and cleaned and scrubbed until the stink of battle was no more.

Beatrix was allowed to dip herself into a tub of hot water, and warm-hearted maids attended to her hair. For the first time since she had it, Beatrix had

somebody else shampoo and wash her silky-brown locks. Lindblum's best masseuses were even called in to loosen her battle-weary muscles, and a famous smith was hired to make her sword look shiny and new. This entire process took the better part of three hours, and by the time Beatrix left this bliss, she felt like doing nothing but sleep.

Hilda, sensing the General's desires, hired their finest airship to take the spoiled woman over to Alexandria. With her fresh clothes (and fresh body), Beatrix looked (and smelled) a hundred-thousand times better. She thanked Lady Hilda a few times, and promised to come back "soon" as she left for the airship. Once onboard, she went straight to her quarters and fulfilled her dream of a nap.

Which was, by the way, completed only too soon. Not one hour had passed before Lindblum was a memory and Alexandria stood in front of her. Beatrix thanked the pilot as she left the ship (and her bed), and waved the vessel farewell as it lifted off into the clouds. With a warm sigh, she gazed at her home of Alexandria, and would have cried out of nostalgia under any other circumstance. But, she had a job to do.

“L-l-lady Beatrix!!” The front door guards sputtered as they saw their commanding officer return, and rushed forward to give her their snappiest salute. She smiled and returned the gesture fondly.

“Hello, Clarice,” she greeted. “Hello, Ronnie. I’m... all right.”

“Yes, my lady!” sniffled Clarice. “You... are safe, as I thought you would be!” Beatrix smiled at her soldiers, and for the first time in a very long while, did not feel the need nor the desire to act formal. After waving good-bye to the guards, Beatrix calmly walked through the castle gate, and sighed as she smelled the beautiful air of her home.

“Well,” she sighed, “I’m back.” After her brief pause, Beatrix calmly continued her walk to the castle. The land was in peace: children were running around, old folks were enjoying the day, merchants were selling wares, soldiers were chatting, barmaids were squealing, and even the thieves were having a merry time. Beatrix greeted every single person she saw on her trip, and made sure to smile a lot more.

As she entered the castle, Beatrix was swamped by guards. Every single one of them, even the newest ones among them, had heard of her great feat

and feared her dead. But no, she was very much alive, alive and very well it seemed. Beatrix smiled, and politely asked them to part so she could give her report to the Queen. No sooner did the soldiers part, however, than did Beatrix gaze upon the object of her search.

“Your highness!” She quickly kneeled to the floor, and kept her eye to the ground. Garnet, too happy for words, paused just long enough to shed a tear before she scrambled forth. She practically pounced on Beatrix, and gave the General her fiercest hug.

“Beatrix!” whispered the Queen. “You’re... you’re safe!!” The knight, however, was completely dumbstruck. She had expected the Queen to be quiet, reserved, and at the most, happy for her safe return. But *this*?

“I...” managed Beatrix. She smiled, and slowly found the strength to return Garnet’s hug. “I am... grateful, my liege. But, I have... important news, highness.”

“Oh, of course,” murmured Garnet. She smiled sheepishly, and let go of Beatrix. No sooner did the girls part did another figure pounce on Beatrix, only

this one seemed even happier to see her than Garnet had been.

“Wow! You’ve got the devil’s luck, Beatrix!!” growled Zidane playfully. Beatrix managed her most civil smile (through some great miracle) and tried her best to calm the boy down.

“I am even glad to see you, sir,” she said. Zidane grinned that same old lunatic grin, and scratched his neck.

“So you *did* miss me!”

“Don’t push your luck,” replied the knight wryly. Zidane grinned broadly and shrugged. The knight sighed, and stood up to address her Queen and possible future King in the manner that befitted a battle-hardened General.

“My lady, I have much to tell you,” she began. Garnet also wore the mask of business, but would not allow Beatrix to tell her everything just yet. Instead, the young Queen guided her bodyguard to the infirmary, passing several of the Vivis (who had waved happily at Beatrix) and Quina on their way. As they wandered through the small medical rooms, Garnet halted upon coming to a room lit only by the rays of the sun.

Freya was in that room, wearing only a large white robe and boxer shorts. She was staring out the window, allowing the golden-orange light to caress her face. Beatrix swallowed, and approached the serene lady with as much gentleness as she could. Even though three days had passed since, Freya still had that look of dejection on her face.

“Lady Freya?” said the knight. The dragoon made no movement, except to wave her tail. Garnet cleared her throat and walked over to give the Burmecian a nudge.

“Freya,” she whispered, “Beatrix has returned.” The dragoon’s empty face suddenly brightened a little, and for the first time since she had been discovered, Freya let a smile on her mouth. She stood up, and waved her white hair out of her eyes as she bowed her head.

“.....I can only assume that you were successful?” she whispered after a pause. Beatrix nodded her head.

“Yes. Though I will admit, it took everything I had and more to free your country.” Freya nodded her head gently, and stepped forth to personally give Beatrix her thanks. The mousy woman rested her

chin on Beatrix's shoulder, and whispered something for the General's ears only.

“(Thank you,)” she said, “(but that is no longer anyone's country. I am grateful, but... to be honest, you have done nothing but save a graveyard.)” The dragoon slowly backed away, and kneeled on the ground.

“The enemies you have vanquished will never haunt these lands,” she said aloud. That statement, apparently, was meant to assure Beatrix that her efforts were not in vain. This did little to make the General happy; if anything, it made her a little more sad to see Freya like this. But then again, in a way, Beatrix could understand what she was going through.

“If...” she began slowly. “...If there is anything else I may be able to do for you, Lady Freya...?”

“No,” came a hushed reply. “Thank you.” Freya performed Beatrix's trademark salute, and without another word, went back to her activity of staring out the window. Beatrix swallowed, and let out a deep breath as she saw Freya gaze. She couldn't help but feel a little crestfallen herself.

“Don’t worry about her,” said Zidane, placing his arm on the General’s shoulder. “She’s still in shock. All we can do for her is be there. Garnet and I are pretty good listeners, so we’re always available should she feel the need to let something out.” He let out a smile, and waved farewell as he went off on his own.

“Oh, sir Zidane?” The Genome turned around to face Beatrix. The knight smiled, and gave him her most impressive salute. “Thank you, my friend. I just felt the need to say that. Oh, and Tantalus sends their love.”

“Oh yeah!” blurted the boy. “I forgot! I heard from boss that they got a new member! Do you know who it is?” Beatrix’s enigmatic smile told stories that her words never could, and for the rest of the day, Zidane pestered her to tell him who the new face was.

Freya was left alone, to sit and stare out the window.

Captain Adelbert Steiner of the Knights of Pluto in the service of the Alexandrian royal family stood proudly on the deck of the *Red Rose*. He had every

right in the world to be happy—after all, he and his knights had done a fine duty for Queen and country. In the past few days, they had dug through every suspicious corner and every questionable crevice, until an answer to their questions was found.

Originally, Steiner and his crew were commissioned to go out into the world and discover why the forces of The Foe had attacked Alexandria. Borrowing the *Red Rose* fleet, the Knights of Pluto had practically been everywhere, and only recently were they satisfied with their findings. Steiner only hoped that the Queen would be equally happy.

“Not much longer now,” came the voice of Commander Erin. Steiner smiled and nodded his head.

“Good, good! Soon, we’ll be back home! The Queen will surely be happy to hear of our reports!”

“I know she will!” squeaked Erin. “I mean, we didn’t go through all that trouble for nothing!” Steiner smiled, and marched around the airship to make sure that his soldiers were ready. Blutzen and Kohel, as usual, were gossiping, and it took a great deal of butt-kicking to get them to snap to attention. Laudo was off spewing in the bathroom, Dojebon

was happily engaged in an eating contest with himself, and Breireicht was fast asleep.

Rounding up Weimar, Haagen, and Mullenkedheim, Steiner brought forth all eight Knights of Pluto to the bridge, and gave a salute. Erin, sensing Steiner's presence, handed the wheel over to Boyd and gave an equally-impressive salute.

"Hey! Looks like you managed to get them all!" she squealed.

"Well... yes," muttered Steiner. "Anyway, how long do you think it will take us to reach Alexandria?"

"Just an hour," answered Erin. "Why don't you all get prepared while you're waiting? Boyd and I can handle everything from here."

"As you wish!" saluted Steiner. He marched away, shepherding his knights with him. Erin giggled at the show, and sang out to her current boyfriend.

"They're so adorable!"

"Not nearly as adorable as you!" replied Boyd. Erin's face turned radish-red as she squealed out his name.

“Boyd! Stop it! You’re embarrassing me!!”

Commander Erin let out a sigh, and turned around to give Steiner her snappiest salute.

“We’re here!” she exclaimed. “Alexandria! Welcome home, Captain Steiner!”

“Thank you, Commander! I can never repay this act of kindness!”

“I’m sure you can!” sang the pilot. “And you can start by calling me Erin. You know how much I hate my formal title!”

“Erm, yes...” Steiner trailed off, and gave a mute salute as he rounded up his troops. With a smile, Erin waved good-bye to the Knights of Pluto, and sighed as they left the airship.

“Finally!” sighed Boyd. “We’re alone at last!!” Erin’s face turned to the color of a tomato, and she shrieked madly as he began chasing her around the airship.

Meanwhile, Steiner and his knights got a warm welcome from the castle guards (some knights got a warmer welcome than others). After pleasantries, the nine warriors marched into town, greeting people that just now began to realize that they had arrived.

Steiner smiled proudly, and regarded the city with awe.

“It’s getting along well!” remarked Laudo. “This place wasn’t fit to breed swine when we left!”

“You take that back!” barked Steiner. He then went on his usual tirade, about how the Knights of Pluto should be this and that, and how they should respect their home and their Queen, and this and that... But, of course, nobody paid attention.

“Sorry, Cap’n,” grumbled Laudo, knowing that only an apology would appease his Captain. Steiner grunted, nodded his head once, and continued to lead the knights.

“But you are right,” he said. “This city is looking much better than it used to be. I wonder how everyone is doing? Well, only one way to find out! Forwaaaaaaaaaaaaard... march!!” And with the cry of their Captain, the Knights of Pluto scurried forward into the city, and didn’t stop their maniacal charge until they came to the castle.

Zidane was currently playing checkers with one of the Vivis when a strange sound came to his ears. Pausing the game, Zidane stood up to see what the noise was. He couldn’t help but smile—or groan—

as he heard the tell-tale *clank-clank-clank* of armor. Zidane could have been blind as a mole and would have known it was Steiner coming back. Nobody else made that much noise with their armor.

“Hey, Rusty!” greeted the boy. He waved in a friendly manner, but Steiner only coughed.

“Humph!” snorted the knight. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I have missed seeing even *your* immature face!”

“Aw, shucks...” snickered Zidane. He feigned a blush, and rubbed his neck as Steiner walked past him. “So, I take it that everything went well?”

“Yes, quite.”

“Well, that’s good. I’m sure that Dagge—I mean, Garnet will be glad to see you back, and Beatrix too!!!”

“I... don’t know what you mean!” insisted the knight. “I... have no doubt that... uh, many people will have missed my presence.”

“Yeah, whatever,” sniffed Zidane. “Just don’t make too much ‘noise’ when you reunite with your sweetheart.” Steiner’s face turned to the color of a strawberry as he growled at the boy.

“Y-you shut up!!” he blurted. Zidane grinned, and hastily cancelled his game with Vivi as he leaped away. The black mage, who was still sitting in his chair, looked up at Steiner.

“U-umm... It’s great to see you, Steiner,” he said. The knight smiled and patted the boy’s head.

“As it is good to see you again, Master Vivi! Forgive me, but I must be off!”

“O-of course!” said Vivi. He smiled, and Steiner was left to visit the Queen and her bodyguard.

Garnet, sitting perfectly still as one of her maids combed her hair, had her eyes closed and her ears opened. She suddenly heard, through her open ears, the familiar sound of armor slapping against the ground. Smiling broadly, joy welled up inside the Queen’s body as she sensed her other bodyguard coming forth. As she opened her eyes, the smile grew very wide as she saw Steiner standing there in the doorway.

“That will be enough,” she said to her stylist. The maid bowed her head, and finished her work before leaving. In an instant, Garnet sprang out of her bed and rushed towards Steiner.

“Steiner!! You’re safe!!” The big guy smiled broadly, and kneeled before his Queen.

“But of course! As long as I still have you to serve, I will always come back safely! My liege, it is good to see you again!”

“And you, Sir Steiner.” Garnet smiled, and bade her bodyguard to stand. “Now, I’m sure you have lots to report to me.”

“You may be surprised,” replied Steiner. Garnet gave him an inquisitive look, and told him to sit wherever he pleased.

“What do you mean?”

“Well... after careful searching and endless investigations, we really have not come up with many answers to our problems. And whatever we did find... was really not of any importance.”

“I’d like to hear everything,” said Garnet softly. She sat down opposite Steiner, and offered him some tea. The knight noticed that two other cups were on the tray.

“Pardon me, my liege, but are you expecting visitors?” he asked. Garnet smiled.

“Well, I’m more *hoping* for visitors than anything else. I asked Lady Beatrix and Lady Freya to attend this little meeting.”

“Ah, and how are they? What news of Burmecia? I heard the king was absent at that last Council of Gaia.” Garnet paused, and slowly swallowed down her anxiety. She took a deep breath, and looked directly into Steiner’s eyes.

“Captain, I also have news for you,” she said slowly. “You see, well—”

“Burmecia is no more.” Steiner grunted, and turned his focus to the door, where a hollow-looking Freya stood. The dragoon, who was lacking her hat, bowed her head deeply before entering.

“What... what do you mean?” asked Steiner. Freya slowly sat in between the two, but didn’t touch her tea.

“It was... completely destroyed... by an invading group of monsters...”

“Savage!” hissed Steiner. “Barbaric! Ghastly!”

“Yes...” Freya let out a sigh, and shook her head sadly.

“But, what of the King? And Sir Fratley?”

“I...” Freya choked on her own words, and slowly rested her face in her hands. ‘I... failed them,’ she squeaked. “I... let them... suffer...”

“So...” Steiner swallowed, and gazed at Freya darkly. “They are...?”

“Yes,” came another voice. Steiner turned around again, and stood out of his chair to greet Beatrix. His fellow bodyguard gave a stiff salute, and tried her best at a smile as she saw Steiner.

“It is good to see you, Steiner,” she said. “I... have missed you since you left.” Steiner’s face grew slightly pink, and he had to cough to make sure that nobody saw him flustered like that.

“Ah, yes, and... ah, it is good seeing you too, Lady Beatrix.” The other bodyguard nodded her head, and sat across from Freya. The dragoon, by all account, was dead to the world.

“So, what of The Foe?” asked Garnet. “What could you find out about him?”

“Only that he was a pawn of some sorts,” answered the knight. “From what we gathered, this Foe chap was not meant to destroy Alexandria, but to merely whittle down its forces. I, ah, also heard rumors that he had posted a garrison behind at

Burmecia, but until now, I only thought that this was a rumor.”

“What?!” spat Beatrix. “You mean to tell me that the monsters I fought were also part of The Foe’s regiment?!”

“Yes, I—” Steiner stopped himself, and gave Beatrix a questionable gaze. “What do you mean, ‘the monsters you fought’?”

“It’s a long story,” sighed Beatrix. “And I’m not sure how to sum it all up. Let’s just, ah... say that, ah... Freya asked me to, ah... liberate her hometown.” The conversation halted briefly, and all eyes turned to the mousy knight. She was holding her cup of tea, but kept staring straight into the liquid. Only her tail moved.

“I see,” murmured Steiner. “So, it seems as if you were successful. Then, what about Lady Freya?”

“Burmecia no longer exists,” murmured the dragoon. Another halt in conversation occurred, and all eyes gazed at the depressed dragoon. She sighed, and quietly began fingering her cup. “But... at least now these threats are over. That is some solace.”

“Yes...” Steiner grumbled softly, and slurped his tea down in one gulp. Beatrix rolled her eyes at his

action, and sipped her drink instead. After tasting it, she realized why Steiner had drank it all down in one gulp. It was quite delectable for such weak tea.

“So, The Foe was a pawn used for the sole purpose of whittling away our defenses?” said Garnet. Steiner nodded his head. ‘And he had a garrison of monsters positioned at Burmecia?’ Again, he nodded his head. “Why?”

“We weren’t able to find that out, sadly,” replied Steiner. “And I would have liked to know who he was working for. Doubtless some other tyrant whom we must defeat!!” Garnet nodded her head in agreement.

“If what you say is true, then Alexandria will be ready. I do not wish to be caught unawares again.”

“Worry not, my Queen,” assured Beatrix. “As long as we are here to protect you and this land, nothing will be able to stop us.” Garnet smiled, and thanked both her protectors. She excused herself to attend to other duties, leaving the three knights to sit alone.

“I must excuse myself as well,” coughed Steiner. He saluted, and gave a warm smile. “My ladies, I bid you good day.” He span around and left Beatrix

and Freya by themselves, and was almost out the door before the former stopped him.

“Steiner, wait. Do you, ah...” Beatrix paused, and couldn’t help but look down as she managed to say the rest of her speech. “Do you, ah, have the time to talk? I would really like to have a word with you.”

“What about?”

“You’ll see.” She gave a smile, and a very uncharacteristic wink. “Don’t worry, you’re not in trouble! I’d just like to have a talk with you.”

“Oh.” He frowned in thought, and grew a little more flushed. “I, ah, would like that very much.” And so, with a smile, Steiner led Beatrix to a place where they would have ultimate privacy.

Freya was left behind to stare at her tea and think.

Taking Steiner up to one of two private balconies, Beatrix calmed her mind as she recapped what she desired to say. Thoughts aside, the day was a gorgeous one: not too warm, with plenty of cool wind and a sunshine that suggested summer days ahead. The balcony, known by only a privileged few, would make a great place to converse in privacy;

Alexandria, for the most part, was populated by people with ears.

Once arriving, Beatrix leaned on the balcony rail and gazed at her home. Alexandria had changed so much since the Mist Wars!...And yet, it really had not changed that much at all. Sure, there was a fresh new Queen with a kind heart and a wise mind, and maybe a few other residents that had not been around in the “old days”, but other than these tiny differences, nothing really was different—except for, of course, the architecture, but with the previous invasions, that was a given.

Beatrix prepared her mind and mouth for what she was going to say as the *clank-clank* of Steiner’s armor grew louder. The noise paused briefly, and a familiar sound came from behind.

“Ah, what a great day!” beamed the knight. “This truly is a magnificent place! It is too bad that the gardener has yet to plant those hanging gardens! It would be idyllic otherwise!”

“Yes...” Beatrix trailed off, and swallowed. Turning around, she placed her hands behind her back and let her single eye look at the armored man before her. “So Steiner, how have you been doing?”

“Reasonably well,” answered the knight. “What with invasions and investigations, I really haven’t had the chance to breathe. But... now we are in a time of peace, at least I’d like to think so, so perhaps I will be given a refresher.”

“I see...” Steiner smiled, and crossed his arms smugly.

“But, you know me. Always placing duty before anything else. Of course, it is my job, and I have been trained to protect the kingdom, but you know something?”

“What?”

“I love this job,” said Steiner as he joined her in leaning over the balcony. “Some people may disagree with me, but I personally find great joy in dedicating my life to serving and protecting others. It gives me a purpose. Would you not agree?”

“I know how you feel,” replied Beatrix softly. ‘And, uh, actually... that’s what I’d like to talk about.’ She paused, and turned to face him. Her eye grew very serious in a matter of moments. “Steiner... I have to be honest with you. I think of you as a friend and ally, and maybe... just maybe... something much more than that.”

Silence. But Beatrix could tell that Steiner was absorbing everything. He was *listening*, bless him. She sighed, and continued.

“But... and this is going to be hard for me to accept as well... I really don’t think, in our positions, we could really, ahh... try for a, uh, relationship like ‘that’. You see, uh...” She paused again, and forced herself to continue looking at him. This was much harder than she thought it would be.

“If... you and I... uh, *got together*, let’s say... Then, well... I...”

“You are concerned about our duty to her majesty?” offered the knight. Beatrix smiled, relieved that he at least understood that much.

“Right. I, for one, feel that, if I were to enter into a serious relationship with *anyone*, ah... then... well, this may sound selfish, but I would want to retire so I could devote the rest of my life to that person. Do you understand?”

“Completely!” coughed Steiner. Beatrix smiled as she heard the faintest of all chuckles come out of his mouth. ‘It... does not sound very selfish at all... Well, I am not a good judge of these things, but... Say, you wanted to, ah... have children.’ (Here

Steiner's face became *very* red—and Beatrix's face turned pink as well) “You would, uh, have to devote most of your hours to them. And... your duty with the Queen, would, ah... prevent that.”

“Yes...” Beatrix's smile grew a little broader, and the weight on her shoulders decreased. *So, he does understand after all... Well, that makes things easier for me.* “And... and if we both, ah... got into this kind of relationship—”

“Who would protect the Queen?” concluded Steiner. He smiled lightly and nodded his head at Beatrix. “A strange situation indeed. Ah, the things we must sacrifice for our liege!”

“So... you really do understand?”

“Yes,” he sighed. Under his breath, he uttered, “(Though I may not completely like it.)” Beatrix smiled warmly, and stepped closer to him.

“It's all right. Even the most loyal knight must have their own opinion. I'm... just glad you see things this way. Don't get the wrong idea, Steiner—I really like you, really I do, and if you or I or both of us were in a different situation...” She paused, and chuckled sadly as she shook her head.

“The Queen cannot lose two of her most valuable bodyguards,” she stated. “Sir Zidane is an acceptable fighter, but I sense that he may be King within five years. Quina is more of a cook than a warrior, Amarant is never in one place for more than five minutes, Eiko has her own affairs to deal with, and the Vivis are numerous, but not as experienced as us. Tantalus is too unreliable, and Lady Freya...”

“Yes, I understand,” said Steiner, wisely letting the subject stray from the shell-shocked dragoon. Beatrix nodded her head, and shrugged.

“So the dice falls to us. Oh well, eh? I suppose that all the time we spend with the Queen will make up for whatever relationship we could have had, eh?” Steiner smiled broadly at her logic, and couldn’t help but agree.

“Aye! And who knows? Perhaps, if there ever truly is peace, we may face an early retirement!” Beatrix mirrored his smile, and gave her friendliest salute.

“Right. Well Steiner, I’m glad we had this talk. But, I’m even more relieved that you understand my view. It seems then, that since we agree on this topic, there really is no bad blood stirring. You’re right; it was a great day. Thanks for listening.” And

with that, Beatrix leaned forward and planted a kiss on his chin. Steiner's face grew quite crimson in a very short time.

“Erm... well... ah...” Beatrix chuckled politely, and tapped his shielded arm.

“Take care of yourself, Steiner. You've earned a little holiday. Go and take that breather.”

“Y-yes, ma'am!” He saluted boldly, and stormed away to the lower regions of the castle. Beatrix let out a satisfied sigh. The conversation had went better than she could ever had hoped. True, it was somewhat unjust that the knights had to sacrifice a relationship for their duties, but they both seemed willing to give up that right for something much greater (or perhaps more important). Smiling lightly, Beatrix walked down the stairs and decided to pay a visit to a friend.

Said friend soon found himself flat on the cobblestone.

“Zidane, Zidane, Zidane...” Beatrix clicked her tongue in disappointment, and bent down to help the poor boy up. “I can't allow you to court her majesty if you don't start fighting seriously. There is no way

that I will allow you to become King with such weak skills.”

“Hey, gimme a break, here!” he moaned. “I mean, it’s not like I studied ten years straight under the greatest swordsman of our time!”

“You’re a Genome,” she reasoned. “Surely Garland... ah, infused natural fighting instincts in you. Just look at your sister Mikoto. I’m sure she’s pretty strong.”

“Yeah,” he mumbled, scratching his head. “She’s got all the black mages in that village whipped. But I love her, y’know?” They both shared a smile, and Zidane got into his classical attack stance.

“This should be interesting,” muttered Beatrix, reading his posture like one would read a book. “According to your stance, you’re going to dash forward and slice horizontally. I’ve seen it a hundred times before, sir, and I must say that it will fail.”

“Just you wait!” called the boy slyly. “I’ve learned a few tricks myself ever since you left!”

“Then please, show me these... tricks,” insisted the professional knight. “I’d certainly like to see what sort of attack you’ll try on me.”

“Okay,” he sang, “but don’t say that I didn’t warn you!”

“...You never did warn me, sir,” she muttered. Zidane grinned, but remained silent as he leered at his opponent. As always, he dashed forward with his dagger. Beatrix, who saw the attack coming a year ago, shook her head as she prepared to counter. However, just when Zidane got to the point where he would usually slice with his dagger, he jumped backwards, then with blinding speed, vaulted right over Beatrix’s head. He rammed the butt of his blade forward, stinging the knight smartly in the spine.

Beatrix yelled out, but more in surprise than pain, and fell to the ground. Leaping over her again, Zidane placed the tip of the blade against Beatrix’s face and smiled a stupid smile.

“I’ve been watching you, too,” he noted. “I’ve been using that attack so many times on purpose so I could get a feel of what you do to counter it. By now, I’ve pretty much memorized your movements, so all I needed to do was make a surprise maneuver you didn’t expect and come at you from behind—your only weakness, might I add.” Beatrix coldly gazed up at the boy, and quietly pushed the blade away from her face. Save the Queen soon found its

way to the floor, and to Zidane's surprise, Beatrix placed her hands on her head in surrender.

"You know, sir," she said, "that's precisely what my master Atma said, word for word. He warned me of complacency; he warned me to not get used to the same attacks over and over again. You have defeated me fairly and justly. I deserve much worse than this humility for my ineptness and weakness." She snorted, and did not accept his hand when he gave it to her.

"Hey, don't be so hard on yourself," he said. "Hey, tell you what—next time, I'm gonna fight for real, okay?"

"No," she sighed sadly, "there will not be a next time. I... still have much training to undergo myself before I hammer out the weaknesses in my system. You have truly defeated me—not physically, but mentally. With that kind of strategy, young man, you can defeat any opponent that faces you." She let out a weak smile, and looked into one of his eyes.

"Henceforth, because you have shown such keen skills and a fine strategy in which not even I could have spotted, you no longer need my tutelage. I... truly have no right to teach a man who knows my every move....Well done, sir." Zidane smiled

awkwardly and took her hand, and the two fighters shook on it. Suddenly, Beatrix flipped Zidane to the ground, and in a flash, her sword was pointed towards his throat. His eyes bugged out, and she gave him a cruel, almost sadistic smile.

“But remember, sir,” she whispered, “you must never let your guard down.” Zidane sighed, and recovered from the shock. He smiled weakly, and even chuckled at his own ineptness.

“So we’re even?” Beatrix smiled, and kneeled down to his level.

“Yes, boy. We are even. Go now, and make your Queen happy.” She gave him a very quick (and very uncharacteristic) peck, and rose to attend to her duties. Poor Zidane was left lying on the streets, his face towards the sky and a faint red hue on his face. He touched the place where Beatrix had kissed him, and grinned wildly.

“Hey, Beatrix?”

“What?” He paused.

“Did anybody tell you that you’re a great kisser?” She turned around, and gave him a very icy smile.

“Be thankful it wasn’t my *blade* you kissed.
Good-bye, Zidane.”

What’s it like? What’s it like to be needed? I... really wish that I knew. I wish I knew what it felt like to be wanted and needed—really, really needed. Does... does anybody here need me? Do my words, my presence, my actions, my feelings mean anything to them? Am I a necessary part of life, or... else?

I... gave everything in the battle. I literally gave everything to defend what little I had left of my past. I found that I have a lot to give. I found I have a deep reservoir of giving in my soul, and the water is there for the taking. I gave so much in the battle; I even gave my soul. I fought so hard, I literally gave my soul, gave it to the only place I have ever bothered to call home.

Even as I gave everything, I could not win. I was... defeated. Pushed back. Forced to run. I... cried the last of my tears that day. I no longer have the ability to cry, not even over his death. I can no longer cry, because all my tears were emptied out in that fight. I gave my blood, tears, toil, and sweat in that fight, and yet still it was not enough.

Perhaps I am not even alive. Perhaps I am dead, and this object walking around is a shell. Perhaps there is nothing inside me now, now that I gave my soul away for my home. What good did that do me? Even after fighting so hard, I failed. I could not do anything. I could not do a thing, except fight and lose and run and cry and go mad from the insanity of it all.

I lost my home that day, but... did I ever really have a home to begin with? Did I ever really have a... “bed”? What is a bed? Where was the door to my house? Did I ever have a house? If... if ever I did have a house, it is dead now, just like me. I am my own house, and this house died when it was attacked and destroyed. Now, I only have my body and my spear. And that’s it. Nothing else exists of Me, except my memories.

Some would call that a blessing. It might seem that way. After all, it gives me a chance to start over. Start over? From where? Where did I begin before all this happened? Can I begin from that same place? If so, where is it? Nobody will tell me how to start over. I have nothing left, except my body, and my clothes, and my spear.

Oh, of course, I have friends. Ha. Friends. That's all. I don't have anything. Do you know what it's like to have someone? Do you, because I don't. Not now. I did, at one point, but not now. That's so depressing that I almost feel like I can cry again. Of course I can't, so I won't even bother, but... I feel as if I almost could.

Back then... I did not know that he was dead. Why should I? There was no reason for it. I had not seen his body. Only rumors. I only heard rumors. Not facts. I never saw him again, except of course, when I needed him the most. Ha, and then, guess what? He forgot who I was. He had no idea who this person before him was. I was ecstatic that he lived; I was crestfallen that he forgot. It would have been better for him to remain with the dead than living with Nothing.

After all, to be forgotten is worse than death.

But... now, it's even worse than before. At least I had hope then. A shrill hope, but it was still there, stubborn as a mussel. Not now. Not now. Now, I know for certain. He will never breathe again. He will never call out my name, or touch my hair, or kiss me on the nose so adorably. I won't get to see him fight again. This... is... hard.

I don't know why I bothered surviving the journey here. I must have been out of my mind. Oh, wait, yes I was out of my mind. My sanity slipped me there for a moment. Just a moment, quite a blissful moment at that, where I didn't (nor couldn't) care for a thing in the world. I grew savage and wild and uncontrollable, but at least I had no cares. Well, my mind has returned, and I feel like crying again, but I can't.

It's almost funny. Here I am, warrior extraordinaire, and I can't even defend my own past. I let my past, my home be overrun and destroyed. I'm not going to ask why this Foe creature felt the need to occupy my home. That's beside the point. The point is, I failed, and I don't know whether I can find redemption or not. Perhaps it has escaped me. Or perhaps, I found it when I arrived here safely. Ha. "Safely". I nearly killed someone when I first arrived.

Well, I told them about the invasion force like a good little girl. I told them about the monsters that destroyed me and my home, and I told them that I had nearly died getting there. I think I did. Why am I still alive? It does not make sense. Logically, I should have died back there. Yet here I am, alive in a sense, and very much regretting that I was not killed

on native soil. Not like him. At least his burial was honorable. “Died, fighting for his country, the noble warrior”—that’s what the epitaph would say.

“” And this empty space, this emptiness here, it would be my own grave. Such a fitting end for my cowardice. To live, to “survive” the onslaught of the demons, to wiggle out of death’s clutches, only to find yourself very much alive. Ha. I probably won’t die for decades to come. Such a fitting end. And when I do die, nobody will have anything to say, because I failed so many people. I will... just be forgotten.

And now, I while my days around this empty castle, staring out the window or at uneaten meals. I no longer have the stomach for food (ha, I must be getting better, for I believe that was what I used to call a “joke”). My friends try and comfort me as best they can. They really do care for me, of course, but... do they really understand what I have gone through? Do they really know? Of course, some do. Dear Zidane, for one.

I find his company best, and then Quina’s company next-to-best. Poor sweet fool tries so hard to get me to eat, and I only swallow a spoonful to make him (or her, who knows?) happy. I don’t eat

the rest. And Vivi, the dear sweet black mage, he tries so hard to cheer me up. Little one, may the Divine Creator bless you for attending to this lifeless hulk.

Beatrix..... Perhaps, in another life, or under other circumstances, we might have made good friends. Now, the best I can affiliate you with is a person, and nothing more. Just like the faceless people that one finds in Lindblum, you are... just a person to me. Not friend, not enemy....I wish it were one or the other. If we were enemies, at least I could challenge you and die a noble death. Asking for your friendship is too much.

Well, I suppose that I should start to cheer up now. Can't be depressed forever. Poor dear sweet Zidane, you really try too hard. I... wish I could love you. Garnet... I wish I could love you, too. Steiner, big dumb stupid ox, I wish I could love you. Amarant... by God, what's to love in one so callous and indifferent? You and I, though we never saw eye-to-eye back in the "good old days", are very much alike. Vivi... I... feel your past pain, but now you only have joy. Not I.

I wish I could have done more. Oh, well. I suppose I really should try and smile more. I'm

depressing everyone else around me. I'm not so selfish as to throw a pity-party and invite everyone from here to Madain Sarai. I... really should try and make an effort to be happy.

“Freya? Hey, Freya, you all right?” Freya broke out of her thoughts, and gazed at what was now her closest friend. She managed a smile so weak, her mouth almost didn't move.

“Yes, Zidane,” she answered softly. Slowly, she leaned forward to embrace her closest comrade. ‘Don't worry about me,’ she squeaked softly. “I'll be fine.”

...No matter how false the mask may be.

Shattering mask. Failure. I am a shell.

When I was a small child, my mother used to tell me stories of a great traveling pilgrim and the journey he underwent to get to a magnificent shining city. Along the way, this pilgrim faced many hardships and many woes, as well as great reward and ultimate beauty. One incident stuck out to me the most.

The pilgrim and his companion were wandering off the beaten path, into a land of murky darkness. They were utterly lost—in fact, they were walking in circles. Tired from their journey and drenched with the rain, they continued on, though they had no hope of finding shelter in such darkness. Eventually, they hid under an oak tree and waited for dawn, but by the time the sun rose, they were already fast asleep.

A giant who lived in that land discovered them, and in his cruelty, threw them in the deepest, darkest dungeon in his castle. For days on end, he would neither feed his prisoners, nor would he even allow a shaft of light to enter in. Daily, he would come into the prison and beat the two travelers with a massive club. Hunger and physical torture ate at their souls.

The giant's wife offered a way out. In a bag she gave them was a rope, a knife, and a bottle of poison. The two pilgrims did not accept these gifts, though their hopes were vanishing quickly. One miraculous day, however, the pilgrims found a key in the scrolls they were carrying, and with this key, they managed to escape the castle and thwart the giant.

The analogy to my own life is shocking.

Despair is the giant that rumbles into your life when you are at your darkest and most lost. In its

infinite cruelty, Despair will take you by the scruff of your collar and will throw you into its blackest dungeon of the Castle of Doubt. For days, Despair will leave you in this dark pit, never even bothering to come down to see if you are alive.

Then, one lazy day, the giant of Despair will beat you senseless with a mighty club—it will beat you until you are unconscious, and will leave you in the darkness until the next day, where it would give no food nor even rest. It would come down every day after that—it would come down and beat you with its club, every day, until your spirit has been broken.

I am that pilgrim. For days, I have wandered the black meadows of the territory of Despair. The rain drenches my body and soul, and I am so utterly lost that I cannot even find shelter. I hide as best I can, but I cannot escape Despair. He found me, the cruel giant, and threw me into the blackest dungeons of Doubt. Despair would leave me in darkness, would force me to sleep on slimy walls with the maggots and roaches. I would go for days without eating.

Despair would come down daily to beat me, and I would suffer horrible wounds because of its cruelty. This would continue for days on end: each morning I would be beaten, each evening would have passed

without a meal. My body would grow weak, and my soul weaker still. And unlike the pilgrims, I have no Keys of Promise to release me from this prison of Doubt and Despair.

One day, the giant Diffidence came to me, bearing a gift. Curious, I opened the bag, and saw my Death. With the rope I could hang myself, with the knife I could stab myself, and with the bottle I could poison myself. My furry hands gently cradled the bottle like it was a child, and I longed for a way to relieve myself of this torture.

Perhaps I had reason to hope. The pilgrims kept their embers warm by singing hymnals; perhaps my faux mask of happiness would be my own praise. But... I do not have the voice to sing. I... cannot have hope much longer.

One day, giant Despair took me outside to the castle yard, where he showed me the bones and skulls of those he had already killed. He warned me that, after another week passed, my bones will join this pile. Then he dragged me back into the dungeon and beat me again, and all the while I believed his threat.

Carefully, I eyed the bottle. Death smiled warmly and slowly comforted me with its gentle arms. I

sighed as I sadly began to cry on its shoulder, and its hands went to my hair, and combed it just like Fratley would do whenever I was sad. I shuddered, and reached for the knife. I pointed the blade at me... no. I threw that path into darkness. The rope I sliced to pieces with the knife, and the bottle I broke and poured the contents down a drain. These deaths had no honor in them.

“An accident”, said Death. “Let us make it an accident. People die like that all the time. There is no dishonor in an accident. You are too weak from the beatings that Despair gave you, so you cannot enter into a battle and die honorably. But if you have an accident, at least it will not be suicide. There is still honor in that.”

I agreed. I even began to think of a way to perform this trick. In the castle, there are two balconies that few know of. These balconies are very high up in the air, and overlook much of the land. If I were to slip and fall from there... yes... that would seem honorable enough.

I decided to fly.

When one flies, one must not look down at the ground below them. They will see the streets rushing up towards them, and will grow sad as they realize

that Death is coming. But if you arch your head back just slightly, you can gaze at the sky. When one flies, they must look towards Heaven, and not at Death, for in its majesty and innocent beauty, nothing is quite so lovely to look at than the sky. It is the perfect final vision, and if you arch your head back, you can see the clouds and the sun and the pure blue sky. I bet it would be a beautiful sight to see.

Slowly, I got up out of my prison and asked Despair to guide me to the tallest turret of the castle. It grumbled haughtily, and took my hand as it guided me up the long and winding staircase to Doubting Castle's highest peak. As I walked onto the balcony of Alexandria Castle, I closed my eyes and actually smiled as the wind played with my hair. It felt beautiful.

In the distance, I could see a mountain chain just begging to be climbed. I had never been there before, but I very much wanted to. It was too late, though, as the Only Way out was to go down, so I merely sighed and enjoyed the sights. I stepped closer to the balcony, and took the railing in my hand. Slowly, carefully, my feet climbed up on the railing, and I stood there looking at the landscape before me.

The mighty waterfall of Alexandria was visible, and I could just barely hear the roar of the waters from my position. A ghost of steam rose up from the pit, and materialized into the innocent skies above. I could just make out the city of Dali, and if I looked extra hard, I could even see people. In the far distance, airships flew around the world, either on business or pleasure, and a smile of awe came to my breathless mouth.

Even further still, I could just barely make out trees. They were so tall, and they stretched so far, and I desperately wanted to visit these trees and that mountain and the falls and the town. The wind allowed me to get a smell of the world I was leaving, and the skies smiled down on the rest of the world and Oh, it was beautiful!

Slowly, my foot rose into the air, and I prepared to leave Doubting Castle in the only style I knew how. I smiled, and my heart grew light for the first time in a long time, and I embraced Death.

Arch your head back.

To be continued...

5. Restoration

Part Five: Restoration

The talk with Steiner had done wonders to Beatrix's mind and body. She could not have shrugged off the huge feeling of relief that washed over her if she wanted to—not that she tried, of course. Relief was probably one of the most powerful and welcome emotions that the lady knight experienced, and with the exception of hate and love, there were few others so blatantly powerful.

Hate and love... Beatrix had never really experienced much of these two. Sure, there were times when her fury burned so brightly that *hate* was an understatement, and there were times when Beatrix was protecting Garnet that would issue in a strong feeling of love, but aside from those rare occasions, Beatrix could honestly say that she knew neither hate nor love. She didn't know whether to feel fortunate or miserable.

Another emotion, one so powerful that it almost killed off her relief, took over Beatrix as she wandered around the castle. Lunch was gone, and a trusted friend had taken her watch, so with nothing

else to do, Beatrix experienced the most dreaded of emotions, *Boredom*. And when Beatrix experienced boredom, things started to get sour.

Having given up on her routine of instructing Zidane (her schedule was as indeterminate as the shape of a passing cloud), the bodyguard of the Queen had nothing else to occupy her free time. The woman had very few friends, and even in these circles she was not a social moray, and she was not one to go to many places by herself unless duty was involved. Her job filled up most of her day, but Beatrix had been given the rest of the day off, to her dismay, so finding something to occupy the afternoon, and the evening, was her top priority.

Since Beatrix never was any good at finding something worthwhile to occupy her time, she merely settled upon climbing up to the hidden balconies and looking out across the land. She was in the mood to sit and think at the moment—normally very dangerous if the circumstances were wrong, but what other choice did she have? Go out and fight monsters? Hunt down some new romantic interest? Beatrix nearly snorted at the thought.

So, she resolved to climb the stairs that led up to one of two private balconies. Twenty-eight years old

and heavily trained in advanced warfare, Beatrix scaled the staircase in record time, though her running was unnecessary since she had the rest of the day to herself. Perhaps, though she doubted it, she would be late for something if she didn't hurry. What she could possibly be late for was a mystery.

Sighing to herself, Beatrix numbly opened the door and looked out to see the beautiful landscape, the bare terrace that (Steiner was right) needed a few gardens, the marble columns that suggested a more mythical setting, and a figure cloaked in red standing on the railing. Beatrix gasped sharply as she saw the figure raise their foot, almost as if they were about to leap off, and her eyes widened in horror as the figure arched her head back and leaned forward slightly.

“Freya, NO!!!!!!”

The time—One week after Beatrix returned from liberating Burmecia.

The place—The hidden balcony of Alexandria Castle.

The players—Beatrix, a holy knight sworn to protect the royal family; Freya, a despondent

dragoon who has suffered great physical and emotional trauma.

Status—Desperation.

Rushing forward as fast as she knew how, Beatrix wrapped her arms around Freya's waist, and yanked so hard that both warriors plummeted backwards in a heap. They tumbled together towards the floor of the terrace, landing one on top of the other in a disheveled pile, and together they stayed for a brief period.

Wheezing out horrible gasps of air, Beatrix stared at the woman in her arms, who was herself too dumb-stricken to even move. Horrified at what she had seen, Beatrix did not even realize she was still holding onto Freya, but as the dragoon began wheezing, the knight released her and stared back at the mousy woman in ghastly awe.

For a long time, there was nothing but silence conveyed between the ladies. Beatrix could not avert her vision from Freya: the ghastly woman who looked more haggard and horrid now than she ever had been, the dragoon who had gone into the mouth of Hell and was subsequently vomited out, the same knight that nearly cost Beatrix her life upon first arriving...

Now, there was nothing there, not even a shell, just a mass of cells no longer containing life in them. Freya stared back, wheezing just slightly.

“Freya...” hissed Beatrix, “what in the name of everything holy and sacred were you *doing*?” No response came. Freya merely stared back at Beatrix, a look so empty and dead that it would have made a demon break out in a cold sweat. Beatrix shook her head, appalled at what she had seen, and a slight snarl came to her mouth.

“...Why?” was all she could say. “Freya, what on Gaia were you *thinking*? Did you..... Did you really mean to kill yourself?” No response. Beatrix growled and grew fierce as she only received silence. “Talk!! Tell me what you were doing! Did you think that killing yourself would solve all your problems, huh? Did you think that ending your own life would only make things easier, huh? You... You make me sick!!”

Silence.

“You disgust me, you worthless vermin,” snarled the knight. “I thought you were stronger than that. Yes, I know you are sad, but that is no reason to end your own life! Think, Freya, think! Are you so absorbed in your own despair that you would drag

everyone else down with you?! Did you ever think about how everyone else would feel? Huh? Did it ever occur to you that we would grieve over your loss just as much as you're grieving now? Huh? Or are you too sick with your own depression to consider such things? What a selfish, cowardly, waste of a worthless creature you've turned out to be! You're not fit to vomit on!!!!" Silence. Freya swallowed, though her face did not reveal any emotion at all.

"Kill me," was all she could say. Roaring out, Beatrix produced *Save the Queen* and pointed it straight at Freya's forehead.

"Do you desire death so much?!" she yelled. "Do you want to feel the kiss of the blade? Do you want an honorable death? Then come, you rat! Come and face me!! I will be glad to rid this world of such a horrible coward! Come! If you want a noble death, then do battle with me, and I swear I shall make you regret your decision!!!" Freya only stared at Beatrix's sword, too hollow to move. She noticed that, in her depression, she had carried her spear with her, almost as if it desired to follow her.

Beatrix took a step forward, and held onto *Save the Queen*.

“By my code of honor, I am forbidden to attack an unarmed foe,” she spat darkly. “So if you wish to die so badly, pick up your spear and fight me to the death! Believe me, you insignificant rat, you will get your wish!” Freya pursed her mouth, and without knowing it, her hand grabbed the shaft of the Dragon’s Whisker. A sudden surge of animation caused her to stand, and she mechanically held her weapon in an offensive position, as if the movement had been sewn into her DNA structure. Beatrix smiled a sick grin upon seeing her challenger.

“Good girl,” she hissed. “Now come, Freya, and I shall grant your wish of death. It is altogether fitting that I do this; after all, I despise a coward.” Wordlessly, Beatrix charged forward, swinging her sword towards Freya’s head. The dragoon, eager for death, had no control over her hands as they moved the spear to block the attack, nor was she able to prevent her legs from jumping up into the air and delivering a kick to the knight’s head.

The only thing Freya had any control over, in fact, were her eyes. All she could do was watch as her body performed forbidden moves—moves that Freya had not authorized *at all*. Wordlessly, like a ghost, Freya moved around, her limbs acting out of their own accord to defend what little she had left of

her life. A swing, a swipe, a jab here and there, and Freya almost cried as she saw herself fight Beatrix.

The holy knight was secretly fascinated that one who had suffered so much could still have so much fight left in her. To be frank, Beatrix was having a hard time fighting. She was completely serious when she vowed to kill Freya—completely serious, and would have ended the dragoon's life if she had the opportunity. Such cowardice made her sick to the stomach; it was one of the few things that spurned hate in her soul.

But try as she might, Beatrix could not strike Freya. Some foreign power had taken over the dragoon's empty body, and was controlling it in a way that rendered Beatrix's attacks useless. Beatrix could increase her ferocity as much as she wanted: every strike, blow, slash, and cut was deftly avoided or blocked by the dragoon, and a few offensive maneuvers were even returned as well.

Suddenly, Beatrix managed to slice at the knight. A very light gash erupted on Freya's cheek, spilling just a hint of blood on her furry face. Freya did not even flinch as Save the Queen cut at her—in fact, she did just the opposite. From out of the depths of her tortured soul, Freya screamed out viciously,

piercing the quiet air and the hearing capabilities of her opponent.

Shrieking so loud that the terrace crumbled, Freya suddenly flew into a maniacal rage, slamming her spear against Beatrix. The knight gasped in terror, and just barely prevented her face from being cut in half. Her eye widened open in shock as she saw Freya's face. Once contorted in a drooping mask of depression and despair, Freya now had a sickening visage of insane animalism that Beatrix had (unfortunately) seen before.

She had that same look on her face when she first attacked Beatrix.

Roaring out viciously, Freya continued to hack at Beatrix's defenses like a lumberjack against a tree, only with the power of a bolt of lightning and the speed of a clap of thunder. Beatrix had trained under one of the greatest fighters in all of history for ten years straight, yet this barbaric and berserk attack rendered all her lessons useless. She was forced to call upon the special defensive techniques that were only reserved for emergencies, so great was Freya's assault.

Again and again, like a smithy forging swords, Freya bashed her spear against the sword of Beatrix,

hammering away with such an uncontrollable fury and passion that only Atma himself could have countered. Even so, the insane look in Freya's eyes and the unholy snarl coming out of her mouth might have given even the great one a hard time—leaving Beatrix, a mere student, with no chance for survival.

Suddenly, a flash of light and a hideous stab of pain slammed into Beatrix. Both sensations were like getting hit by a charging ox from four sides—only much sharper and more gruesome. As she winced in agony, her eye gazed down at her body, and nearly fell out of its socket as she saw the spear of Freya digging right into her left shoulder. She paled in horror, and beads of sweaty iron fell down her face in a terror-stricken perspiration. Slowly, unbelievably slowly, Beatrix crumbled to the floor, the fall freeing the tip of the spear from her body.

As she slammed against the terrace floor, her eye threw tears out as the maniacal Freya leered over her, a sick smile glaring back and burning green eyes screaming for blood. Fierce hands held the Dragon's Whisker directly over Beatrix's heart, and the knight froze as a wave of fear became her new emotion. Death stepped forth to embrace her.

But, just as sudden as the storm started, it ceased, and Freya dropped the spear on the ground. It made a clanging sound, relieving Beatrix only slightly (for the wound hurt like all creation). Wailing out miserably, Freya cried out and covered her face in shame.

“Oh, God...” she squeaked. “I cannot even die right!!!” And with that, the dragoon crumbled to her knees, staring with eyes of terror at her handiwork. Beatrix felt something wet fall on her body, but since she was close to passing out, she couldn’t tell whether it was Freya’s tears or the oncoming droplets of rain. Maybe it was both.

Grunting out in pain, Beatrix blinked her eye as the rain started to fall. Her shoulder felt like it was on fire, but what else could she have expected from a spear wound? With her injured arm singing out in pain, it was left up to her good hand to cast a cure spell. Unfortunately, the sudden attack that Freya had launched took too much out of the knight, and the injury didn’t make things any better. For now, her shoulder would have to settle for a low-level Cure spell.

Sighing with relief as the wound closed shut partially, Beatrix found the strength to sit up once more. The rain that was falling from the sky was a gentle trickle, as if there was still some bad blood in the land that needed to be swept clean. Taking a deep, painful breath, Beatrix touched her arm gingerly and winced. Though cured, it still felt like a knife was cutting into it.

After examining herself, Beatrix turned her focus towards Freya, who five minutes ago had been a stark raving-mad lunatic bent on Beatrix's gruesome death, and who five seconds ago had declared herself so inadequate that even a proper death evaded her. Though she had openly declared her hatred for the woman's cowardice, and although she had not won their duel, Beatrix couldn't help but feel remorseful.

"Freya?" she croaked. Her voice was pretty beaten up as well, but that was of no concern. "Freya, are you okay?" Silence. The dragoon merely sat there, tears and a droplet of blood being mixed on her face. Her mouth hung open just slightly, as if she was too stunned to even speak. Beatrix swallowed and let out some air.

“...I’m sorry for what I did, Freya,” she continued. “I really am. I... would never cause you any harm. You know that. It’s just that...!” She sighed, snarled, and clicked her tongue. “It’s just that... cowardice makes me so mad sometimes that I, uh, fly out of control sometimes. I’m... uh, actually almost glad that you, uh... stopped me.” Another pause followed. Freya let out some air, and to Beatrix’s wonder, her emotionless mouth curled up in a smile. Then, from out of nowhere, Freya began to laugh out loud.

“What?” said Beatrix, more confused than relieved at the other woman’s laughter. “What’s so funny?” Freya dodged the question and continued laughing. She let out a guffaw so powerful that it was hard to believe she had been contemplating suicide a moment ago.

“What’s so funny?!” insisted Beatrix, annoyance clear in her voice. Freya stopped giggling just long enough to talk.

“...I beat you bad!” she snickered, and Beatrix’s face turned red with anger. “I beat you *bad*! I kicked your sorry butt all over the place!! Hahahahahahaha!! I mopped the floor with you! HAHAHAHAHAHAAAA!!!!”

“Why you little...!” Beatrix snarled in a rage, and her facial expression alone was enough to convey her anger. Freya continued to laugh, though, and giggled so hard that she rolled over on the floor and pounded the paved terrace. Her snickering became contagious, and despite her irritation at Freya’s gloating words, Beatrix couldn’t help but laugh a little herself.

“Yeah, you’re right,” she smiled. “I got beat pretty badly.”

“That’s the under—(G’hahaha!!)—the understatement of the... of the century...” chuckled Freya. Smiling broadly, she stopped laughing just long enough to gaze up at Beatrix and grin. “I never knew you were such a *wimp!*”

“HEY!!” Beatrix once again assumed the role of an angry knight, and Freya continued to chuckle until at last all the giggles left her system. By the time Freya caught her breath and her senses, Beatrix’s anger had died away again, and the knight couldn’t help but smile warmly at the Burmecian’s happy face.

“Ho... ho...” wheezed Freya. “Ha... ah, that felt good...” Beatrix grinned, and pulled on Freya’s arm.

“Come on, you dirty old rat. We’d better get indoors before we drown.”

“Ah, and is little miss Beatrix afraid of getting wet?” grinned Freya slyly. Beatrix grunted and gave Freya a sour expression. Laughing, the dragoon apologized and together the two of them walked back into the castle.

Dripping water across the stairs and the hall, Beatrix and Freya ducked into a private room, where the former stripped off most of her outer clothes. Freya merely shook herself like a dog, the water having no effect on her specially-designed clothes. Beatrix, punishing herself for thinking of such a bad joke, couldn’t help but think that Freya looked like a drowned rat.

Clad only in a light white shirt and white boxer shorts (and her patch), Beatrix and Freya sat down at a table, and gazed at each other. The dragoon, to Beatrix’s surprise, was still smiling.

“Thank you,” whispered Freya lovingly. “Thank you, Beatrix, for rescuing me back there. I... well, you were right. I don’t know *what* I was thinking. I... guess the depression got the better of me for awhile. I’m... I’m, ah, sorry for what I put you through... again...”

“...It’s all right,” assured Beatrix with a nice smile. “But please, Freya, don’t ever pull another stunt like that ever again. You, ah..... ah, um... well, you know.”

“I had you worried,” replied the mouse wryly. She crossed her arms and grinned; Beatrix was not so jovial.

“I didn’t say *that*,” she snorted. “But anyway, you’re welcome.” For awhile, there was nothing said between the two ladies. Freya had just stared straight at Death’s face and had just barely been rescued by a one-time enemy; Beatrix had just fought her very soul out and lost, and to a suicidal rat to boot! Neither woman could quite find the proper words to continue their conversation—not just yet, anyway.

“So,” said Beatrix after a brittle pause, “are you feeling all right?” Freya nodded her head, and gently folded her hands in her lap.

“I came so close,” she said, probably to nobody in particular. “I came so close to dishonoring myself... and running away like a blatant coward. I came so close to making others suffer needlessly... so very, very close...” She smiled and forced a laugh out. “It’s almost funny.”

“I don’t see the humor,” admitted Beatrix flatly. “But... Well, I guess you’re all right now. Right?”

“Thanks to you,” pointed Freya. Beatrix smiled warmly and stared down at the table in humility.

“Thanks... Ah...” Another brittle silence followed. Neither girl could find the right icebreaker to shatter such a strange tension. True, Beatrix had rescued Freya from death, and the Burmecian had started a riotous laughing spree, but things were still pretty awkward between them. Sighing, Freya rested her head in her arms and kicked at the floor.

“...This is so crazy,” she whispered. “I thought I was stronger than that. I really did. And, I thought I was beyond all that. When I left Burmecia, I thought I had put my past behind me. I thought I was moving on, proceeding to my next stage of life. Ha, what rubbish! And when I finally do come back... who else do I meet but you?”

“What’s your point?” asked Beatrix politely. Freya shrugged.

“When I tried to come back home, I was beaten by you. The whole place was deserted, or else it stank of death. Anyway, I was more or less forced to leave Burmecia again. What a drag, eh?”

“Cleyra was sort of the pseudo-Burmecia to me. It had a sense of home to it, without ever actually being home. I thought, that if I stayed there, I could... I don’t know, have a sense of purpose or belonging. And do you know what happened?” Beatrix frowned in defeat, and grumbled to herself. Freya didn’t need to ask that question. Beatrix knew better than anyone what had happened at Cleyra.

“Yeah,” she croaked. “You met me.”

“And got beaten again,” added Freya. She smiled, and waved at the air with her hands. “Then the whole place got destroyed. Call me paranoid, but I think Fate was sending me a message. Maybe I was being told that... well, my home was elsewhere. Maybe I *belonged* elsewhere. I don’t know. I’m not as spiritually in-tune to the world as others. I’m just guessing that, well, maybe I wasn’t *meant* to have a home, at least not in Burmecia or Cleyra.

“When I found Fratley again, after the defeat of Kuja, we returned to Burmecia. I thought I could finally get some peace and quiet, and maybe then I could finally call somewhere home. Augh, I’m starting to sound like Zidane now.” Beatrix smiled at the mention of the boy (and his desires to find his own place of birth), and easily saw the parallel

between the two lives. However, Zidane found what he was looking for... and the results were far from heartwarming.

“But sir Zidane found what he was looking for,” pointed Beatrix. “Did you?”

“I’m almost glad I didn’t,” whispered Freya slowly. She smiled again, only more conservatively than before. “A year or so passed... and Burmecia got attacked. Fratley and I fought, as did whoever had survived the previous massacres, but... well, we just couldn’t win. As far as I know, and I pray I’m wrong, I’m the only survivor of my race. Ha... just think about that...” Despite her smile, it was clear that Freya still clung onto a bit of her sadness. Beatrix frowned sadly, and reached out to touch her hand.

“I’m sure there were others.”

“What does it matter now?” snorted Freya. “I failed my people and my past, and I almost killed myself out of grief. Ha! Why I’m still alive now is a mystery—no, wait, it’s not.”

“Hm?” The confused look on Beatrix’s face told Freya to keep talking.

“It’s not a mystery at all,” resumed Freya. “Remember me talking about how Burmecia might not have been my home?”

“Yes.” A pause.

“...I think I was driven away from Burmecia for a reason,” suggested Freya. “And you know what? It’s taken me all this suffering and so much death to realize it. Burmecia’s not my home—not my home at all. Oh sure, I was *born* there, and raised there, but... it’s not my *home*. It’s not where I live.”

“...And, where might that be?” asked Beatrix gently. Freya chuckled and shrugged.

“I haven’t a bloody idea,” she admitted. “I know it’s not drowning in some ridiculous pool of guilt, or wallowing in a slough of despondency. It took me a pretty rough battle to realize that. Oh, speaking of which, are you all right?”

“Huh?” Beatrix, who had become engrossed with listening to Freya, had completely forgotten about her wound. She touched it, and it stung horribly, but it was also healing nicely. “Oh, that. It’s, ah, it’s nothing... Nothing that a little time won’t heal.”

“Oh.” Freya smiled, and tilted her head over to the side. “I’m glad to hear that. I’m really sorry for

what I did, Beatrix, I truly am. I know I cannot make up for it—”

“It’s all right,” shrugged the knight. “I’m sure I deserved it for some past sin. Anyway, I’m glad you’re feeling better. You know, Freya, you’re much easier to get along with now that you’re not so moody or insane.”

“Moody?!” blurted the mouse, her smiling face betraying her angry words. “Excuse me?”

“For real,” said Beatrix coyly. “You were so depressing to hang around that I felt like putting you out of your misery right on the spot.”

“Hm,” sighed Freya, “then I would have beaten you up, just like I did before.”

“Okay, I think we need to drop that,” grumbled Beatrix darkly. Freya grinned, and apologized for boasting. The girls took a deep breath, and the environment lightened considerably. Beatrix briefly excused herself to check up on her clothes, which were still too soggy to wear. Freya excused herself as well, and thanked Beatrix for her time.

“Oh, wait...” The Burmecian, her spear on her shoulder, turned around to hear the other warrior.

“...Won’t you stay for some tea? Maybe we could talk a little more?” A pause, and a smile.

“I’d be delighted.”

“What’s on your mind?” asked Freya, holding a cup of steaming green tea. Beatrix shrugged lazily and sipped at her drink.

“Sir Fratley... you loved him a lot, right?”

“Yes, of course,” replied the mouse. “We, ahhh... ahh, hehe... well, we planned to, ahh...”

“I see,” smiled Beatrix gently. She coyly added, “‘The best-laid plans of mice and men’, eh?”

“Cute,” muttered Freya. Beatrix laughed lightly and drank more of her tea. Outside, the rain was just now abating, and the dark clouds were parting to reveal a happy sun.

“Anyway,” continued the slightly older knight, “I brought up Sir Fratley so we could talk about our loved ones. Now I’m not going to divulge on Steiner—we’ve agreed to keep our position as bodyguards for the Queen, and that’s that. God knows I can’t have a loving relationship with anyone and protect the Queen at the same time.”

“Unless it was with the Queen herself,” noted Freya wryly. Beatrix sneered in disgust.

“Ugh, that’s sick. Besides, even if I *was* madly in love with her highness, and thank God I’m not, I’d have a level head about it all, and I’d continue to serve and protect her. Isn’t *that* the best form of love?”

“You say that now,” pointed Freya smugly, “but if you ever were in love with anyone...”

“*Anyway!*” Beatrix spat out her irritation, and gave Freya an icy glare that indicated the topic should be kept on track. “I was saying that it would be nearly impossible for me to have a meaningful relationship with anyone. If I did, I’d have to retire from my service and focus on that other person. If I had that kind of relationship with Steiner, who would protect the Queen?” Freya shrugged, and stirred at her tea before sipping at it. Beatrix certainly had a good point to make. Duty forced people to make so many sacrifices. She, of all people, knew that well.

“I see what you mean,” she said. “But at least now, you’ll be close to those you love.”

“I suppose,” shrugged the human. “But... well, it’s not the same. You’d know better than I would, what with Fratley and all.” Freya merely shrugged, and finished off her tea. Beatrix kindly poured her another cup and allowed the conversation to continue.

“It seems we’re both in the same boat now,” sighed Freya. “We’ve both lost our loved ones to our duty. One way or another, the ones we have loved, or could have loved, have been taken away from us. Such a pity...” Beatrix shrugged, and finished her tea for the day.

“I don’t mind,” she said. “I can handle it. It really doesn’t bother me as much as it should. I’ve lived most of my life by myself. My parents died when I was five, and I was raised by a traveling circus for most of my life.”

“You’re *kidding!*” blurted Freya. “A *circus?* *YOU??*”

“It’s a part of my past,” admitted Beatrix with a shrug. “And it’s not embarrassing in the least. I was raised by a very kind man who took in a lot of other orphans into his circus. Those were, I believe, the happiest days of my life...” Beatrix sighed nostalgically, her single eye staring off into space.

Freya smiled, memories of her own childhood crawling back into her mind.

“So,” she concluded, “we’ve both lost parents at a young age, and we’ve both lost loved ones...”

“You were an orphan, too?” whispered Beatrix. Freya smiled and nodded her head.

“I was. I didn’t get caught up in a circus, obviously; my aunt and uncle raised me. I spent *my* early years in that rainy city. It *would* be strange if we both were recruited by a circus. What was yours called?”

“The P.S. Circus.” Freya’s green eyes shined, and her mouth curled up in a smile.

“Ah, I’ve heard of that before,” she said. “I believe my aunt and uncle took me to see a performance when I was still young.”

“Hm... I do remember visiting Burmecia once, and I think I met an impressionable young female during my sojourn. She was clinging onto someone with an ‘Iron Tail’. You don’t think...?” Beatrix gazed at Freya, her eye glimmering as a new revelation hinted at a past life, and a past encounter, and a time where everything was simpler and more innocent and more fresh.

“I... wonder if...” began Freya. Both women smiled playfully.

“Nahhh,” they said simultaneously.

“I don’t think it was the same rat-girl,” smiled Beatrix.

“And I don’t recall seeing a Cyclops-woman,” countered Freya. Beatrix gave her companion a sour look, and wordlessly put the two empty cups and the kettle of tea away. When she came back, her clothes were still damp but otherwise dry, so Beatrix wedged herself into her outfit and wiped the hair from her eye.

“It really was good talking to you, Freya,” she said. Freya stood up, and bowed her head in thanks.

“And thank *you*, Beatrix, for so many things.” The two women grinned at each other, and performed salutes. Beatrix scoffed as she saw the mousy woman salute.

“Hey... Freya?”

“Yes?”

“Could we... well... start over? As friends?” A pause. Freya’s furry face beamed with a warm glow, and the Burmecian bowed her head.

“Of course, Beatrix, of course. I’d be honored.”

“Then, take care of yourself, my friend.”

The words, noted Beatrix, came out rather naturally.

Things that are exceptionally light

1: Feathers

2: Sheets of paper

3: Clothing

4: Aluminum

5: Pebbles and small rocks

6: Babies

7: Grass

8: Pillows

9: Hair

10: Beatrix’s heart

This final one was the lightest one of them all. Beatrix woke up that morning, not only refreshed,

but invigorated and feeling so light that she nearly defied gravity. She had never felt so wonderful before, or if she had, it had been too long since her last period of elation and ecstasy. The smile on her face was just one sign of her happiness; even her patch looked happy.

Of course, she had every reason in the world to be feeling light. Beatrix had recently saved the life of a (new) friend—and not only that, she had helped this friend back into the world of light once again. Beatrix knew that helping other people was satisfying—after all, that was a part of her job—but she never really experienced it this way.

Freya, her friend, was starting to fare much better since their talk the previous day. It had only been a little while ago that she was flat out on rock bottom—in fact, she was so low that suicide had been contemplated, and was very nearly carried out. Thankfully, Beatrix prevented this death, and had helped Freya back into a life of normality. Now, though she was still mournful at times, Freya had returned to her usual self, and was smiling significantly more.

Which, in turn, made Beatrix smile.

She smiled all the way to the Alexandrian tavern, in fact. The bar was just opening, and the keep was still preparing for the day. When he saw Beatrix, he waved and asked what she needed.

“I’m not sure,” sighed the General. “I don’t want any alcohol, thanks, so you can just give me what’s left.” Shrugging, the tender reached into his supply and handed Beatrix a cup of hot tea. She smiled faintly and regarded the cup with false amusement. The brew was good, though, and well worth the small amount of money she had paid.

The door to the bar opened, and an old friend and one-time student of Beatrix strolled in. He called out to the tender, and ordered “the stupid special”. Smiling, he leaped onto a stool and pushed Beatrix gently.

“Hey, Bea! What’s up? You’re looking lovely today!”

“Why thank you!!” beamed Beatrix in a surprisingly bubbly voice. The young man literally fell out of his seat as he heard her squeal.

“Whoa! Hey, what the...?”

“Don’t worry, sir,” sighed the knight. “I just wanted to see if you had your guard up. Poor,

foolish Zidane. You really need to work on that. I fear for Garnet.”

“Ahh, no worries!” he assured her. “It’s all good with me and the Queen! Oh, uh, speaking of which, that’s why I came here. I need to talk to you about something.”

“All right.” Beatrix bade him to sit again, and she bought a drink for him. “What’s on your mind?”

“Well, first of all, how’s things with you?” he asked. “I heard you and Freya had a little scare last night. What happened?” Beatrix smiled faintly, and shrugged as she sipped at her tea.

“...Just something personal,” she replied. “Though I think that, from now on, Freya and I will be spending more time together.”

“Oh.” He smiled, perhaps a little too broadly, and poked her shoulder. “You’re not—”

“We are good friends, Zidane,” answered Beatrix emotionlessly. “And I plan on keeping things that way. I do not care for your perversions.”

“Yikes,” he sighed, tapping his chest. “It hurts me right here to think that I hold such a lack of esteem in your mind.”

“Been brushing up on vocabulary?” said Beatrix coyly. She grinned, and gave him a poke herself. “Don’t feel so glum, sir. Truth be told, I respect you very much. You only bring these stereotypes on yourself by acting childish. Were you to become more of an adult in mind, I would not be so quick to jibe you.” Zidane smiled, and drank from his cup as he let the silence hang between them.

Slowly, both liquids vanished as the duo sat in the bar drinking. Beatrix was the complete opposite of Zidane when it came to socializing with others. She tended to be withdrawn and just a little bit impersonal when it came to people; him, on the other hand... Well, Zidane was just Zidane.

“Hey,” said the boy with the tail, “like I said, I wanna talk to you about Garnet.”

“Hm, feel free, sir.”

“Thanks. Anyway, uh, I love her a lot, y’know?”

“So I’ve noticed...” A pause.

“Okay, okay. I’ll let that one slide. Anyway, I love her a lot, and we’ve been through so many things together. I want to be by her side always, and well, I was thinking about asking her to marry her.” Instantly, Beatrix spat out the hot tea she was

drinking, nearly scalding the poor bartender in the process.

“You’re not serious!!” she blurted. Zidane gazed at her in horror.

“Sorry about that. Maybe I shouldn’t have been so blunt—but, you know me.”

“*You, marry Garnet?*” continued Beatrix, almost as if she didn’t hear him. Zidane gave her a mad look and pouted.

“Well, yeah! What’s wrong with that?” She sighed, and helped the tender clean up the mess she had made as she replied to his question.

“On the surface, nothing. You are a noble soul, sir, and a fair warrior. I may be halfway blind, but I can tell that her excellency loves you very much. I do suppose that, initially, the two of you would make a fine couple.”

“But...?” Beatrix sighed.

“...I still do not think you are worthy of ruling this country alongside her,” she resumed. “You are but a mere thief. You know nothing of politics or of the military or economics or anything. All you know are stealing, fighting, cursing, and adventuring.”

“Hey! Didn’t we just have a talk about stereotypes?!” The female sighed in irritation, and gave the one with a tail a tired look.

“Sir, you must know that these are all true,” she pointed. “I know you have many good points to you. But you are heavily inexperienced when it comes to running a country. I do not believe that you could make a good King. I apologize, but I cannot allow you to marry her majesty.”

“But... but...”

“And besides!” growled Beatrix. “You flirt too much! Poor Queen Garnet will be heartbroken before your honeymoon is over!”

“Now that’s just not true!” growled Zidane. “I love Garnet a lot! I’d never hurt her like that, not when we’re like we are now! Besides, when was the last time I flirted with a girl? And who was it?”

“When you were with me,” uttered Beatrix flatly. Zidane smiled and scratched his neck nervously.

“Yeah, well, can you blame me?” Beatrix gave him a cold glare. “Yikes, sorry! Anyway, I was just teasing you there. I like you a lot, Bea. I respect you, and I want to see you happy, but it’s not like I’m in love with you or anything!”

“.....Right.” The older knight snorted, and finished her third cup of tea. She stood, and saluted Zidane. “My dear comrade,” she said, “you still have much to learn. I have my doubts, but you must understand: I only want to protect the Queen and this kingdom. I cannot allow her majesty to have anything less than the best, and until you prove otherwise, I cannot give you my blessings.” He sighed in defeat, and kicked at the floor.

“Man! That stinks!”

“...bye, Master Vivi! Take care! Your skills at Tetra Master are increasing daily!...Oh!” A loud voice interrupted the tavern’s quiet, and as Beatrix and Zidane gazed at the door, they found Steiner standing there in a daze. “Ah...”

“Oh, hey Rusty George!” greeted Zidane (this was his new nickname for Steiner). “How’s life treating you?”

“...I suppose it’s been well,” replied Steiner civilly. The armored knight had long ago learned to endure Zidane’s childish nature, and though the two were still far from being friends, they certainly could work together well if given the chance. Noticing Beatrix, Steiner smiled and saluted.

“Ah, good morning, Lady Beatrix! I do not wish to copy off of this rascal, so I shall instead ask how you have been fairing.”

“I’m fairing fairly fair,” smiled Beatrix. Steiner chuckled, and Zidane rolled his eyes. “Seriously, though... I’m actually doing quite well. But I fear I will not be doing so good in the next few days. Sir Zidane here has, ah, caused me to worry.”

“Oh? About what?” Steiner stepped forward, and gallantly grabbed hold of the hilt of his sword. “If you have caused Lady Beatrix any strife...”

“Hey, relax Tin Man!” grinned Zidane. “I’m just asking her blessings for something.”

“Oh? What?” A pause. Beatrix sighed, growing more and more reluctant to reveal the piece of news she had received from Zidane. She didn’t know whether she was the first one to hear about it or not, so she was unsure as to how she’d get the information across.

“...I suppose you can keep it confidential,” she said. “Sir Zidane here has more or less asked for my blessings. He plans on proposing to the Queen!”

“Eh?” Steiner gazed over at the thief, a combined look of amusement, confusion, and intrigue on his

face. “Are you sure?”

“Positive,” replied Beatrix blandly. Steiner nodded his head slowly.

“I see. Well... I suppose, then, that I shall wish you good luck. I suppose you are the best man for the job. I don’t know if she’d ever agree to marry another.”

“Steiner!” hissed Beatrix. “What the devil are you *saying*? This boy here hardly qualifies as King material!” Steiner smiled and laughed out loud at the slightly-younger warrior.

“I thought the same thing, too, when I first met him,” he replied. “In fact, I couldn’t stand the little monkey. But slowly, over the course of our travels, I grew to respect and even admire him. I must admit, when I saw him run back into the Iifa Tree to rescue an enemy, I knew right then that he was the right man for the job.”

“...But!” stuttered Beatrix. “Surely not!”

“Oh, my dear lady...” sighed Steiner. “We need to have a talk. Sir Zidane, please allow me to vouch for you, and maybe if I convince Lady Beatrix that you are indeed a noble man, then perhaps she will agree with me.”

“Uhhh...” He smiled, scratched his head, and waved at the knights. “Sure, whatever. Go knock yourselves out.” Steiner promised to be back as quickly as possible, and led Beatrix as the two of them secluded themselves to a private area to speak. Zidane, wanting to hear Beatrix’s new decision, waited around and had another drink.

A few minutes passed, and Zidane was growing bored. He wanted to hear what Steiner and Beatrix were saying about him, but because the two had wandered off to a place unknown, he could neither hear nor see them. He hoped that Steiner was saying good things. Beatrix was starting to sound a little too overprotective, and even though she had reasonable cause for concern, Zidane didn’t think she had *that* much to worry about.

As he contemplated, the door to the tavern swung open again, revealing a proud Steiner and a smiling Beatrix. The one-eyed knight stepped forward, and performed her finest salute.

“Please forgive my earlier actions, sir,” she said. “It seems as if I really have misjudged you. Hearing an account of your tale from Steiner has made me see that maybe, you are the right man for the job after all.

“True, you have much to work on, but like her majesty, your heart is in the right place. The two of you, working together, might bring this country back to its former glory, and perhaps beyond.” To his surprise, Beatrix knelt down and hung her head, allowing her wood-brown hair to fall freely. She took his right hand and kissed it dutifully.

“I would be honored to have you as King, sir. You have my blessings.”

“Ahhh...” Zidane smiled joyously, too embarrassed to speak. “Uhhh, thanks, I guess. You too, Rusty George. I definitely owe you one!”

“Ha!” snorted Steiner. “It seems you owe many of these ‘ones’, and yet you never pay me back!”

“Ehh, don’t worry,” smiled Zidane. “I’ll buy you a suit of armor when I’m King.”

As the three of them laughed and joked, the bartender silently polished another mug clean. Their conversation, while important, was none of his business. As long as he kept his place clean and got his due pay, they could have been talking about an invasion and he could not care less.

Though, he had to admit, there would be plenty of people who would pay good money for this

delicious rumor...

I need to sort some things out. It's obvious that we're all going through major changes, and I feel as if we'll go through even more by the end of the year. It would do me best, in this era of peace, to contemplate upon the future. I know Master Atma told me to never think about the future, for it is never certain, but still...

My greatest concern is, of course, Zidane—more so than usual, at least. He's always a handful and I feel as if I'm babysitting him most of the time. I know that a knight such as myself cannot baby-sit a future king—what an outlandish thought! And yet the poor naïve boy already has thoughts about proposing to her highness!...I have reason to worry.

I realize that he can be very noble, selfless, and bold if the circumstances are correct. From what Steiner has told me, Zidane could very well become a great king. Still, I have my doubts. The boy was a thief, and his behavior towards other women is appalling. He cannot take anything seriously, and I highly doubt his ability to protect the kingdom in

times of danger. And trust me, sir, there will be times of danger in the future.

Yet for all my worrying, I do believe that fate will bring Zidane to the throne. I know her majesty loves him very much, and if he were to propose, I am almost certain that she would accept. If the two of them work together, then perhaps this kingdom will experience a golden age. I pray it does.

But I still have doubts. I now know that her highness is not of royal blood—and yet, she has handled this kingdom very well since the death of her mother.....Perhaps I am being too hard on the boy. He has no more royal blood in him than Quina does, and yet... well, perhaps he'll do well. Maybe I shouldn't be so concerned over things, but I am.

I guess it's just an old habit of mine.

After leaving the bar, Beatrix took some time to mull over the things that had happened in the past hour or so. Zidane had revealed his intentions on marrying Garnet, and if she were any other girl, Beatrix would not be concerned in the least. He might have been young, but the boy had the right to marry anyone he wanted.

But this was the *Queen* here! He wasn't just marrying any normal girl off the street—this was a *Queen*! True, Garnet herself was not of royal blood, but she had been raised like royalty, whereas Zidane had not. Beatrix had every right in the world to worry—the kingdom's fate seemed unsure if he were to become king.

But, then again, who *else* would Garnet marry? She loved no one else, and although an arranged marriage with another noble or prince might be possible, the kingdom would probably not prosper as well if she had wed a loved one. Beatrix was caught between the proverbial Rock and Hard Place; no matter which direction fate took, and it was a guarantee that it would take one or the other, things did not look too great.

As she walked along the streets of Alexandria, Beatrix bumped into one of the many Vivis—literally. After apologizing and helping the mage up, Beatrix decided to have a chat with one of the few individuals who could really understand her. Vivi understood, and took Beatrix by the hand as she led him to the church by the docks.

Aside from an ever-present moogle, the two were alone in the church. Vivi had to convince the moogle

to give them privacy before anything could be said. The conversation would have to be short—there was nothing to be seated in, except the dusty floor.

“So what do you wanna talk about?” asked the young mage. Beatrix brushed the hair out of her eye and sighed.

“...The future,” she replied.

“Oh?”

“...Yes. Vivi, can you keep a secret?”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding his head.

“Well, don’t tell anybody else, but I think Zidane plans on asking her majesty to marry him.” The Vivi seemed to smile, even though his mouth was invisible.

“Oh, really? Wow!”

“On the surface, it does seem like a wonderful idea,” admitted Beatrix. “But think about it. Do you believe Zidane is really King material?” Vivi took a moment to think about things, and shrugged after awhile.

“...I guess so,” he replied. Beatrix made a sour face.

“You guess so... Well, think about this. Zidane knows nothing about politics, at all. He has no experience in military strategy, he knows nothing of economics or trade, and I fear he’ll resort back to his flirtatious ways after a few months.” Vivi silently hung his head in thought, the words of Beatrix running through his mind. Everything Beatrix had said was true, to a degree, and Vivi had to admit that.

“But... he’s a really nice guy...”

“I know that,” sighed Beatrix sadly. “I know he’s a nice guy. He’s a great friend, he’s loyal and kind, he’s very brave, and to my own surprise, he’s quite the battle strategist. He may not be the strongest warrior in the army, but his heart more than makes up for it. Do not misunderstand me, Vivi. If this were any other woman, any woman at all, I’d support his decision with all my heart.

“But...” She cut herself off, shaking her head in defeat. “...It’s the *Queen*. He wants to marry somebody of royal blood. I know of no rules that state a monarch must marry someone of noble birth; no, they can wed common street thugs for all my knowledge.”

“Well...” Vivi paused, making sure that he got his words out just right. “...Umm, Garnet—I mean, Queen Garnet, she didn’t know about any of that stuff either, right? She didn’t know about war and ruling countries...”

“But she was *raised* to,” replied Beatrix. “And as we all know, Zidane was not. Don’t misunderstand me, I like and admire the boy very much, but you must admit that he’s not the first person you think about when you think of Kings.”

“.....Yeah,” admitted Vivi after a pause. “...I guess you’re right. But... if Queen Garnet didn’t marry him, then *who*?”

“That’s another problem,” sighed Beatrix. “I know her majesty doesn’t love anyone else the way she loves him. She just wouldn’t be happy unless it was with that silly monkey. I’m pretty sure I know why that is... Anyway, you can see that I’m in a dilemma. As protector of Alexandria, it’s my *job* to be concerned over these things.”

“Yeah, I know,” agreed Vivi. “It sounds like a tough job.”

“Oh, you have no idea,” grunted Beatrix wearily. “...Sometimes... I just want to give up. Technically,

I can retire anytime I want. I've served my terms, and there *are* other people that are competent enough. If I did retire, I suppose I'd end up with Steiner, but then I'd be in close proximity of somebody who protected the kingdom, and I'd have a fit of nostalgia and I'd be right back where I started. So... I guess I can't give up." Smiling in defeat, Beatrix shrugged to herself and prepared to leave.

"Hey, umm..." She turned towards Vivi.

"Yes?"

"...Umm..."

"Don't worry, little one," she said with a smile. "As long as I have breath in my body, I shall always be loyal to this country. I suppose I have no more power to stop the inevitable than you do. Perhaps this arrangement will be best after all." Vivi seemed to smile, and nodded his head in agreement.

"Yeah!" Both of them said their goodbyes as they left, the little one waddling off to play with the other children. Beatrix blew out some air, pushing away the strands of her long hair, and walked right out of the church—

—and straight into Freya.

“OOF!!!” With a slightly comical collision, both ladies slammed into each other and fell to the floor. Beatrix was angry for only a few seconds, but upon seeing her new friend, her mood lightened and she apologized.

“Clumsy human,” muttered Freya. “It’s a wonder you can move around at all, what with that patch of yours.”

“Good seeing you too,” retorted said clumsy human. Freya grinned, and helped Beatrix stand up.

“Sorry,” she said, dusting herself off. “I’m never in a good mood in the morning. But what *is* that eye patch for, anyway? I’ve always wondered about that! Did you lose your eye in a fight?” Beatrix shook her head no and lifted the patch up for Freya to see. Behind the cloth sat a normal, healthy eye, completely capable of vision.

“Ah. But I don’t get it. Why do you wear it if your eye’s perfectly fine?”

“Well, for two reasons,” explained Beatrix. “First, having only one eye is good training. The eye I normally use is my weak eye, so I’ve spent a good deal of my life strengthening it, and my skills.”

“Ah, so it’s a training method,” mused Freya. “... And the second reason?” Beatrix paused, clenching her teeth tightly. She took a deep breath, and shook her head.

“It’s...”

Luke! No! You won’t die! Please, no! Luke, please get up! I won’t allow you to die! Get up! Please!

“...It’s personal,” replied Beatrix softly. “... Something I’d rather not talk about. Something traumatic...”

“...Ah,” said Freya, a tone of understanding in her voice. “All right. I suppose it’s none of my business. Anyway, how are you doing? I haven’t seen you since our talk yesterday.”

“And you’re already missing me?” smirked Beatrix. Freya made a face and gazed at her friend strangely.

“...Cute,” she muttered. “Anyway, I suppose I have. Would you like to come over and see the

house I'm renting?"

"Oh, you have a new house?" Freya nodded her head, and led Beatrix to the hovel that she had been given during her stay. It was decided that Freya, though recovered from her morose state, would not be left in a city where she was the only resident. Kind-hearted Alexandrians thus scouted out a simple three-room house for her in the district, and she fell in love with the quaint place since the minute her furry feet stepped through the door.

"Nice!" complemented Beatrix as she stepped inside. "It's small, but I don't see why you'd need any other place. Reminds me of the home of a dwarf."

"It's more along the lines of the houses in Madain Sari," pointed Freya. "And you're right, it is awfully small, but then again, I don't need large estates to live in. This house makes me feel like I'm not by myself. Oh, would you care for something to drink, or to eat?"

"No," groaned Beatrix, "I had plenty at the bar this morning." Freya smiled, and fixed herself a cup of wine. Beatrix, not one to judge her friend's reasons for alcohol at an early hour, merely sat down at the nearest table.

“...Oh, Freya?” The dragoon, who herself had just recently sat down, hummed softly as she gazed at her friend. “Can you keep a secret?”

“I’ve been renowned for my silence from time to time,” she answered coolly.

“All right. Don’t tell anyone this.....”

Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos cackled wildly as they guided a golden-haired boy with a tail towards the castle of Alexandria. Lachesis especially took great pleasure with this new turn of events—after all, the Genome’s life would become *very* interesting in the next few decades, if all went according to plan.

Usually, Zidane Tribal was a confident, spunky, energetic, and feisty young lad, but today he was abnormally quiet. In his pocket was a ring, a ring in which he had actually *bought*, with money he had actually *earned*. Though he still clung proudly to many of his bandit ways, Zidane did not want to keep his reputation forever. Besides, he had to go honest sometime, and he figured the ring was a pretty good place to start.

Zidane knew all too well that the path he was taking would be a difficult one. Being King meant that he had to give up on a lot of things he enjoyed, such as womanizing and sleeping in past lunchtime and drinking and cursing and stealing. Once he placed that ring on Garnet's finger (*if* she accepted), his past life would be over forever and a new one would have to take its place.

Zidane would have to be *responsible* from now on, God forbid. The word scared him more than anything Kuja or Garland could have thrown at him. Being King didn't mean he could make or break any rules he wished, or that he had servants waiting on him all hours of the day, or he got to order people around, nor even he got a beautiful bride with the deal.

No, being King meant that he had to use a spade and a plow to raise food out of the earth. He had to rule every citizen kindly and fairly, remembering that not a one of them was a slave, but a free subject, and he would have to bring up any children to do the same. He would not have favorites either, neither with his children nor his people. If enemies came, and they most certainly would, he would have to be first in the charge and last in the retreat.

Zidane hardly had experience in most of these fields, but when it came down to it, these requirements were all he really needed to know. Governing, trading, war, economics, and everything else fell under one of these requirements or the other, so truth be told, all he *really* had to do was his best.

Breathing slowly and methodically, Zidane hopped off the raft that shuttled people between the town and the castle. He waved at the guards and tried his best for a smile, but to be honest, he was just plain nervous. Asking a common girl to marry him would have been unnerving enough: all that commitment, loyalty, love, and honor would have to last their entire lives. Wedding vows did not ask “for better for worse, til’ we don’t feel like doing it anymore”; no, it was until *death alone* parted them, and no exceptions were ever made.

Marrying a common girl would be unnerving, but marrying a *Queen* was downright mind-blowing. It was true to say that Zidane loved Garnet very much, and he wanted to spend his remaining years with her, and so on and so forth, and it was also true that Garnet loved him, and so on. They both loved each other intensely and immensely, and at first, marriage seemed logical.

But, not only would Zidane have to be faithful and loyal and loving to his new wife forever and ever until death took one, but he was also required to be *King* as well. Just one of these responsibilities made his stomach do flips; two of them sent his entire body into convulsions. It was not as if he feared marriage or love, he just feared his own inadequacy.

Beatrix was right—Garnet deserved the best there was, and Zidane knew he was anything but. His own feelings of insufficiency were the only real things preventing him from sprinting up the stairs to her room and showing her the ring right then and there (he was in the hallway at the time, and just at the first step).

He knew he would never be worthy of Garnet's affections. It was a classical fairy tale romance between the two of them: he a not-so-humble thief, she a refined Queen of a powerful country. He had slowly grown to love her, ever since the kidnapping way back when, and life without her seemed impossible at best. Zidane truly did want to be with Garnet for ever, and he was darn willing to sacrifice all the “fun” things he enjoyed for her.

Sighing, Zidane knew he was going to regret every single movement of his body as he ascended the staircase. Thankfully, it was a long series of steps, which delayed the inevitable. Deep in his mind, Zidane did not want to go through with any of this. He knew he would never be able to give Garnet the life she deserved; his presence just might have brought only hardship, and maybe even destruction to the kingdom.

But somehow, he moved onward, and got to the top of the stairs in horribly quick time. He grunted as he realized the fates were against him. One of them must've made the steps short that day, or else they gave him wings to fly above the heights. Whatever the reason, Zidane's feet continued walking, his ultimate destination but a few paces away.

Three knocks, three fates, three times he could have turned back.

"Come in!" said the melodic voice of Queen Garnet. His stomach feeling sicker and sicker by the hour, Zidane put on his acting cap and painted a bright but false smile on his mouth. Thankfully, Garnet was not so close to him that she could tell something was amiss.

“Hey, Dagger!” smiled Zidane. Queen Garnet, dressed in her usual white gown, stood quietly and smiled as she saw the young boy.

“I told you that you may stop calling me that,” she said. Zidane shrugged and kept his faux smile.

“Ehh, old habits die hard.” Casually, as if he did it every hour, Zidane plopped down on the Queen’s bed and made himself comfortable. He did not even take off his shoes.

“Zidane...” said Garnet in a very scolding tone, “what did I tell you about lying on my bed?”

“Sorry.” Lazily, Zidane sat up, planting his shoes on the ground. “So anyway, Dagger, I came by to ask you a question.” She smiled, and like a true girlfriend would, offered him a glass of iced tea. He guzzled one cup down in a single swallow, and she couldn’t help but laugh at his poor manners.

“You’re going to choke,” she warned him.

“Nahh, I’m fine.” Smiling, Garnet sat down and slowly began sipping at her tea.

“So what was it that you wanted to ask me?” Grinning, Zidane pulled the ring from out of his pocket, and thrust it out for Garnet to see.

“Well, I was gonna ask you if you wanna marry me.” Suddenly, Garnet spat out her tea, drenching a part of the room with the surprise spit. She coughed uncontrollably on a few droplets that had lodged in her throat, and Zidane winced as he ran over to help her. Several slaps on the back ceased her choking, and with a face flushed from top to bottom, Garnet squinted at Zidane in all his bravado.

“...Say what?” she managed, a choking sound still in her voice. Zidane’s grin was so weak that even a blind man could tell it was fake, and he scratched his neck in embarrassment.

“...I wanna know if you’d be my wife,” he said, and this time he kneeled down in traditional manner, showing her the gem he had bought (fittingly enough, the stone was a garnet). The Queen’s eyes lit up in wonder, and her mouth hung open in awe. She knew that Zidane was never one to beat around the bush... But asking her to marry him cold turkey??

“I... I...” She swallowed several times, gazing at Zidane with eyes full of hope and love, and at the ring with her personal stone embedded in it. Her hand went to his, and she smiled just faintly. Taking

a deep breath, she made up her mind and gave the young Genome her answer.

To be continued...

6. Janus

Part Six: Janus

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“...I’m sorry, Zidane,” she said, “but I have to decline. I can’t be your wife.”

“.....What?!”

The time— Just a few seconds after Zidane proposed to Garnet

The place—The Queen’s bedroom, Alexandria Castle

The players—Zidane, a carefree thief proposing to the Queen; Garnet, Queen of Alexandria and object of Zidane’s affections.

Status—Confusion

“...I said I can’t be your wife, Zidane,” replied Garnet calmly. “...I’m very flattered, but... I have to decline. I’m sorry...” Slowly, she turned her back on

him and walked away. Poor Zidane, still in a shock, rushed off after her.

“Hey, hold on a sec!” he called. “...What? Why? I, I don’t understand!”

“I’m sorry, but... I don’t think you’re meant to be King,” she replied, her back still facing him. Zidane grunted out in protest, and reached to touch her shoulder.

“But—”

“No,” stated Garnet, pushing his hand away. “I am Queen and my decision is final. I cannot accept. Try to understand, Zidane.” She slowly thrust in a deeper wedge of distance between them, and walked over to her vanity mirror to attend to her hair. Poor Zidane was left there to gawk at what had just happened.

Zidane cursed mentally and kicked the floor. He had thought she would say Yes!! He thought she would be overjoyed, and would embrace him deeply, and would cry, and all that! He *swore* she would have accepted! But what was this?? Just like a snooty Queen would, she turned her nose up at him and brushed him off like a fly. A fly! After so much they had been through, after so many strange and

unbelievable things, *this* was the end result? It couldn't be!!

“...No!” he shouted. Zidane rushed over to her, and fell to his knees like a common dog. “Please, your highness, please marry me! I, I know I’m not the best man for the job, and I know I’ll never make you as happy as you should be, and I know I’m never gonna be a great King or husband, but please! I love you, Garnet! I, I wanna be with you forever! You and only you! Please marry me!”

“I said No and I *meant* no, Zidane,” stated Garnet in a more scolding voice. He shivered with hurt and frustration, and stood back on his feet to face the Queen eye-to-eye.

“Garnet, *please!!!*”

“I’m not that easy, Zidane Tribal!” spat the Queen, who still had not faced the young man since his proposal. He made a sour face, and laid his head on her shoulder in agony.

“Dagger, I.....I...” Zidane’s tears were suddenly brushed aside as the Queen turned around, her hair cleaning his wet face. The poor Genome nearly went into cardiac arrest as he saw a very sinister smile on Garnet’s face, and raised a curious eyebrow as he

anticipated what sort of tricks she would have in store.

“.....Gotcha,” she sang. Poor Zidane stared at her in confusion, obviously still a few pages behind the young woman. She grinned, slowly folded her arms around his neck, and locked her perfumed lily lips onto his in what was their first true kiss.

Zidane’s shock lasted only a few seconds more, but slowly, the surprise faded and he smiled as the girl he loved pressed her gentle mouth to his own. His hands went for her long, luscious hair, and she let out a sigh of content as she gently ran her hands over his back. Slowly, she broke away, her eyes bright with stars and her face glowing with happiness.

“Of course I will marry you,” she said softly. “Of course, of course. I thought you would never ask.”

“Oh. You had me worried there for a sec...”

“ACK, you’re *terrible!*” she screamed. The Queen of Alexandria playfully began pounding on poor Zidane, and soon the two were wrestling like a bunch of children. Zidane cackled out loud, and grabbed and lifted the gentle Queen high in the air, twirling her around like the propeller of an airship.

She laughed out loud as she was being spun around, and once he was too exhausted to carry her, her lips went to his again and the two calmed down a little.

“...Oh, man...” he sighed, rubbing his nose against hers, “you really had me going there for a sec!”

“Hm, I know,” she smiled. “I wanted to say Yes initially, but I had to make sure you wanted me, so I made you sweat a little. But you did fine, Zidane. You showed me that you really do love me, and for that I am grateful. I should kick myself for ever doubting you.”

“Nahh, I probably deserved a little rejection from the one most important to me.”

“...Oh, Zidane...” The ecstatic Garnet sighed, and cuddled up next to the man who would soon be King. “...I... wow, I really don’t know what to say.”

“Ehh, you don’t have to talk, canary,” he assured her. Garnet squealed as she heard his most precious pet name for her, and gave him another kiss before backing away just slightly.

“You know,” she said, “this little arrangement will change everything. You’re going to have to stop flirting with every female that you see, and you’re

going to have to undergo some training before you can become King.”

“Ach, I got the same grilling from Beatrix,” moaned Zidane. “She doesn’t think I’m up to the task. She thinks the kingdom will collapse if I take the throne.”

“Really?” chuckled Garnet. “Sorry. I should have a talk with her. But really, Zidane, can you blame her? You’re not the first person people think about when they think of Kings.” He made a disappointed face, and hung his head in shame. She smiled brightly, and walked back over to give her fiancé a tight hug.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m being so rude, when all of Alexandria should be celebrating. Huh, just like me...”

“You think they’ll take this news well?” asked Zidane. Garnet shrugged.

“Who cares? This was my decision to make. I’m Queen over this land, aren’t I? And aren’t I entitled to my own choices in life? Trust me, Zidane: if I did not think you were fit for the job, I really *would* have rejected you.”

“...So...”

“Yes,” she said, smiling sweetly. “I think you’ll make a great King, Zidane. And... maybe you’ll make a great daddy.” She smiled and rested her hand on his chest, and he smiled that same goofy old smile at the mention of parenthood. *Me, a father?* he said to himself. *Ho boy, what have I gotten myself into this time?*

“Busy, busy, busy!” Head chef Quina scurried back and forth between six pots of boiling and simmering stews, tasting a few, nodding a bulbous head in approval over others, and shouting so many orders that not eve s/he could remember them all.

“Get this stew hotter!” s/he cried. “It too cold, will freeze a tongue! Make this soup cold! Cold soup not always good, but this time a must! Where is bread??”

“Here, Chief!” shouted one of Quina’s helper chefs. “It’s out of the oven, piping hot!” Quina smiled, and bounced over to the steaming loaf of bread. One whiff told the Qu that it was ready to be eaten.

“Ah, smells good!” s/he complimented. “But make many more! Make many more, for we will

have many-many guests! More, more!”

“Oy, what a hassle,” moaned the cook. Several other hired hands scurried into the kitchen, chanting out like drill sergeants as they prepared for the wedding. Three perilous months had passed since Zidane proposed to Garnet, and in that time, all of Alexandria—indeed, all the world had heard of the arrangement. The past three months had flown by in a fiery uproar, where everybody that had a use prepared for the marriage, one way or another.

It was true that Quina was one of the busiest bodies in all the kingdom. S/he was responsible for cooking the immense wedding feast, after all, so the gluttonous Qu had been slaving frantically for weeks on end to prepare for the big day. One hundred seven chefs had flown in from all corners of the globe, most of them from the Mist Continent. Together, these “Chefs of Destiny”, as one crazy old woman called them, had worked long and hard hours to pass off culinary perfection, and to one who could not cook, it was a fascinating sight to see.

Tantalus had arrived two weeks before the wedding day, with their newest member Lani in tow. Zidane greeted his brothers and new sister warmly, and together the entire gang went out on one of the

wildest bachelor parties ever recorded in historical documents (it actually *was* recorded as history, seeing as how this was a new King and all). Lani herself joined Beatrix and a few other ladies in showing Garnet one last wild night on the town, but unfortunately, Beatrix's presence dulled the festivities. She never was much of a partier.

That aside, more and more people had considerably tougher jobs to perform. The group of Vivis were given the important task of decorating Alexandria Castle, while most of the townspeople contributed to the village and the outside area of the castle. The children tossed streamers and threw sparkling confetti; older people whittled stone statues and marble images, and even those that had no skill were assigned with keeping track of guests.

Steiner and his crew of Pluto Knights had been assigned to security. The big guy himself made sure that the wedding would go off without any trouble, and even though he allowed Tantalus and a few other of Zidane's unsavory friends inside, he still distrusted them. As for Freya, she was placed in charge of finding gowns for the bride and bride's maids (along with Beatrix), so she was able to spend a lot of quality time with new friends.

The representatives of the World Council came a few days ahead of schedule, as well (the wedding was slated to take place about a week from the present day). Huffle from Dali brought forth a dowry of gold, and Quale from the marshes brought bundles of food that quickly became essential in the feast. Stella was willing to part with her precious Stelazzo coins, and Ghiott the dwarf brought his finest tapestries and blankets to decorate the castle walls.

The mages and the Genomes all came with simple yet heartwarming gifts, and even Eiko and her moogles friends arrived. Stiltzkin and Artemecion trailed them behind, with dozens of grateful moogles still singing about how Mognet Central was saved. Good old Cid and Hilda dragged nearly half the population of Lindblum with them, and Vanderhaum summoned up great scholars from Daguerro, as did Bishop Benedic from Esto Gaza and Dr. Tot from Treno.

In short, the days right before the wedding were the most hectic of them all, and with the exception of Amarant, who had not been seen since The Foe invaded Alexandria, everybody that had ever known Garnet of Zidane had come. The atmosphere was so exciting that some people thought it was terrifying.

Needless to say, this would all definitely go down in history.

To be able to find a secluded place in Alexandria was impossible, but somehow, Freya managed. As she stepped away from the chaotic crowds crammed behind her, she let out a great breath of exhausted air and brushed the hair out of her eyes. She was unarmed (what need of a weapon did she have during a wedding—unless, of course, it was one of “those” marriages?), and her hat was gone from her head, so she would not be quite as conspicuous if she snuck away.

Freya found her way to the docks behind the church where she had bumped into Beatrix a few months ago. The waters were disturbingly active, as if even the fish were celebrating, but she made no comment about it as she entered the sacred building. Her eyes turned towards a ladder that had been placed directly under the steeple. Desiring privacy, she decided to climb the ladder in order to distance herself from the crowd even more.

Upon arriving at the top (Freya was accustomed to being around very high places, so the roofs did not dizzy her in the least), the dragoon found one other figure up there with her, quietly staring away

from the crowds. Doves were fluttering around her, and one was peaceably perched on her outstretched finger. Beatrix looked very serene and maybe a little mystical as she stood on the roof with the white birds surrounding her, and Freya smiled and crossed her arms as she regarded her friend.

For a little while, neither of the ladies spoke a word. They really had a lot on their minds, but for the time being, silence was much more appreciated than a conversation. One by one, the doves flew away from Beatrix, leaving her with only the one on her finger, and of course, Freya.

“I can’t stand large crowds,” said Beatrix suddenly, as if the two ladies were merely picking up where they last left off. “I’m not really good with lots of people.”

“But you said you were once part of a circus,” noted Freya. Beatrix shrugged and let the dove go.

“That’s different,” she argued. “In a circus, it’s a whole lot more impersonal. You don’t have people running up to you making demands left and right. You just perform, and let everyone smile, and be on your way for the next act. But here...” She motioned towards the crowds of people cluttering through

Alexandria, the noise so loud that the ladies had to raise their voices slightly.

“Here,” continued Beatrix, “it’s a whole lot more different. You *touch* people, you talk with people, you’re there, with them. I’ve known some people who love to socialize, and be the belle of the ball, but I’m not one of them.” Freya smiled and let out a very polite laughter as she walked towards her friend.

“I know how you feel,” she said. “I’ve gotten used to a life of solitude myself over the past few years. They say that humans and us Burmecians are social animals, and that if we don’t get contact with members of our own species, we’ll die. But, you can do pretty good by yourself if you have the right means.”

“True,” sighed Beatrix. The slightly-older woman sat down on the roof, hugging her knees close to her chest and letting her hair tickle her thighs. Freya joined her, opting to sprawl her furry legs out instead. The Burmecian’s tail twitched from time to time, but other than that, there was stillness between them.

“What’s on your mind?” asked Freya. Beatrix shrugged emptily.

“Eh, I dunno. I guess the days have gone by so fast that I haven’t even had time to catch my breath.” Freya nodded her head in agreement, and the two warriors sighed as the silence became their third companion. Though they were friends, and were drawing closer by the month, they hardly ever held very deep or meaningful conversations, unless the mood struck them.

Both Freya and Beatrix were the quiet, thoughtful type, allowing their minds to wander and their lips to stay frozen. They always had something on their mind, but would usually never speak unless spoken to. They understood each other very well, though—perhaps a little too well, considering that a little over a year ago, they had been enemies.

“You know what?” said Beatrix. Freya looked at her friend and mentally goaded her to continue. “... To be perfectly honest, Freya, I’m against this wedding. I don’t want it to take place. Oh, don’t get me wrong, I love this kingdom and her majesty very much. I’ve even grown to love sir Zidane, God forbid.” (Freya had given her friend a doubtful face after hearing that last declaration.)

“...It’s just that... well, I still have my doubts,” sighed the knight. “I mean, in my heart I know

Zidane will do just fine as a King, just as her majesty did well as a Queen. He may be inexperienced, but he's got heart, and he has a connection with the common folk that even her majesty does not. In a sense, he's sort of like Steiner, I guess, even though comparing the two of them sounds silly."

"They *are* two very different people," said Freya with a smile.

"Yeah... But, there's something else that bothers me about this wedding..." Beatrix trailed off, and Freya scooted a little closer to learn what else was bothering her friend. A furry hand touched Beatrix's elbow, and Freya nodded her head. Beatrix let out a smile, and instead of pouring her heart out, she stood up.

"Here, stand up," she said, and Freya slowly did so, unsure what Beatrix was about to do. The knight unsheathed her sword, *Save the Queen*, and pointed it at Freya. 'Dear friend,' she said, "don't think I've just gone mad, but would you care to have a friendly duel with me?" Freya gazed at Beatrix despite her request to not think the knight insane. Her eyes traveled between the sword in Beatrix's hands and the edge of the roof just barely beyond their reach.

“...You mean here? Now?” asked Freya. Beatrix nodded her head.

“Yes. Here, now, right on this roof. What’s the matter, afraid you’ll slip?”

“.....No,” mumbled Freya bitterly. “It’s just that... well, this isn’t exactly the best place to have a sparring match.” Beatrix groaned out loud and made a show of expressing her irritation.

“Oh, please,” she moaned. “Weren’t you taught anything by your instructors? I know my master always told me to be prepared to fight on any terrain. This roof seems stable enough to hold us both, and if one of us falls, the other will just have to catch her.” Freya mumbled, and made a face as she considered Beatrix’s strange request.

Indeed, fighting on this roof was no danger: Freya had battled on much more dangerous plateaus than this, and against many more enemies. It was more of a strange, unheard-of request than anything else, and it was the last thing Freya expected out of Beatrix.

“Well,” she sighed, “I don’t have a weapon.”

“Oh, excuses, excuses,” moaned Beatrix. The knight looked around for something Freya could

use, and found a spear-like object lying on the roof. It was the remains of a fancy gate that had found its way on the roof after Kuja's invasion, and now all parts save this last bar had been recycled into something else.

"Here," she said, tossing the pseudo-spear to Freya. "It's not much, but I guess you'll have to adjust." Freya said nothing as she held the steel object in her hands. The point was very blunt, so it was more of a clubbing weapon than anything else, and it was awfully short and thin, shorter than any other weapon she had used.

".....It's not much of a fight if I use this against your sword," she muttered.

"I'm going to fight left-handed," stated Beatrix in an irritated voice. Freya decided that it would be best to keep her mouth shut from then on out. Her incessant whining was obviously making her friend angry, and since Freya was starting to like Beatrix, her rage was the last thing she wanted. Apologizing for her rude behavior, Freya stood in defensive position and prepared to mock-fight the other warrior.

Beatrix ran forward, slamming her blade down with meek force. Freya blocked it, having to use

both hands to keep the short, spear-like weapon from being thrown out of her grip. It really was useless; in fact, the mousy warrior probably would have fared better with just her bare hands.

“...Let me tell you something,” said Beatrix roughly. The two warriors held their position a little while longer, and broke to strike again. Freya jumped high into the air, aiming her weapon at her friend and diving down with enough force to break through the roof. She didn’t, but she also missed Beatrix, who gave a semi-powerful kick as she leaped towards the knight. Freya was tossed a little distance, but rolled back to her feet and rammed her spear forward. It just barely blocked Beatrix’s own sword.

“What’s that?” she asked. Beatrix’s concentrated face disguised her overall mood.

“...I... don’t like change,” she said as she pressed her sword down harder. Freya smiled, and before continuing their talk, her foot shot out and kicked Beatrix in the shins. Freya spun around once the sword was released, and slammed the soft end of her fist on Beatrix’s head. The other warrior grunted and took a few steps back to shake herself loose before attacking again.

“I... don’t adjust well,” said Beatrix, coming back for more still. Her sword swiped at Freya, and cleaved a second time, and a third. A fourth swipe slashed at the dragoon’s clothes, and the near-useless spear of Freya rammed forward in revenge.

“Why not?” asked Freya as her weapon locked up with Beatrix’s. It was plainly obvious that neither warrior was putting a lot of effort in the fight.

“...Well... I was just never like that,” countered Beatrix—verbally and physically. Her knee slammed into Freya’s stomach, and the dragoon bowled over in pain. Beatrix took this opportunity to slam the flat of her blade on Freya’s bowed head, and the dragoon found the floor in quick time. Taking just one deep breath, Beatrix walked over and aimed the point of her sword at Freya’s nape.

“That... was too easy,” she said, not even close to breaking a sweat. Freya mumbled something, and managed to push the sword away as she rolled onto her back. She didn’t get up at all; she merely laid there, her eyes glued to the sky, her mouth somewhere between a smile and a frown. Beatrix smiled as well, and sheathed her sword before lying down next to her friend.

Like a couple of little girls laying in the field, searching for clouds with familiar shapes, the two warriors laid on the roof, silent and thoughtful as always. They both respected each other enough to not pry further, and a few good minutes passed before either one of them spoke.

“...Are you afraid?” whispered Freya. Beatrix rolled over on her side and gazed at the dragoon quizzically.

“Hm?”

“Are you afraid of change?” Freya rolled over as well, gazing at Beatrix with her green eyes. A space of only an arm’s length separated them.

“...Sort of,” mumbled Beatrix softly. “...I never could adjust to anything well. First it was my parents dying, then the circus, then my adoption into the knighthood of Alexandria, then my years spent training with Master Atma, then...”

For you, dear one—I shall wear this badge of honor for you.

“...Well,” sighed Beatrix after a suspicious pause, “I’m just not one to easily adjust to change. I do become accustomed to new things after awhile, but it can take years before I really become adjusted....I guess that’s why I don’t retire. I mean, I love my job and I love this kingdom, but... well, I’d have a tough time getting used to being away from Alexandria.”

Freya, whose sensitive ears were receiving everything Beatrix had to offer, smiled warmly as her friend slowly bared her soul. Never could she have suspected that Beatrix held such feelings in her heart, or such thoughts in her head. She had always been seen as a tough, businesslike warrior with the strength and beauty of a goddess and a powerful sense of duty. But, beneath all that, something *else* lurked, something that perhaps only Freya knew about.

Freya kept her smile, and placed her furry hand on Beatrix’s cheek. The dragoon had a feeling that their conversation had been extremely intimate; indeed, it was possible that she was the only one who knew how Beatrix felt about such matters. Despite her smile, though, Freya couldn’t help but feel a little sad for Beatrix. The noble woman was in

need of more friends like this. She had so much to offer...

“...Beatrix...”

“Sorry,” said the knight with a faint smile. “I guess I just never really opened up to anybody like that. You’re only the second person that I’ve talked to about this, and the first has been dead for a few good years.” Freya mirrored Beatrix’s shy smile, and mentally wept as she received such an unheard-of honor.

“I’m glad you trust me so,” whispered Freya. “Maybe, someday, I can tell you a few secrets of my own. Not now, though.”

“Are you going back in there?” said Beatrix, anticipating Freya’s departure. The Burmecian smiled sadly and chuckled.

“It’s pathetic, how transparent I am,” she said. Beatrix shrugged, and helped Freya stand. The day was still light, so they had not been up there long, so they probably were not missed much. Freya still had more gowns to find (and try on), and Beatrix needed to have a talk to Bishop Benedic and Regent Cid. It was going to be an awfully busy week, for everybody.

“...Hey...” As the two knights climbed down from the steeple, Beatrix stretched out her hand and gently grabbed Freya. The dragoon looked at the knight expectantly, and it was obvious that Beatrix wanted to say one more thing. She was uncharacteristically shy, mumbling and stuttering like a little child meeting important people.

“...Hey, uh... Freya?”

“Yes?” Beatrix shut her eye, and slowly managed to say what was on her mind.

“...Can I, uh... well, um.....Can I have a... a hug, if it's not too much to ask?” Freya grinned when she heard Beatrix's unusual request, and walked forward to fold her arms over the human. Like Beatrix said, she was never good with other people, and signs of affection were foreign to her, having grown up without a family. Freya knew that such a request coming from somebody with a background like hers was both simple and complicated all at once, so the only way to approach these things was being direct.

Beatrix slowly returned the hug, though with much deliberation and uncertainty. It was cute, in a way, albeit unexpected. The hug lasted a good six seconds, and the two ladies parted and wished each

other good day as they merged once again into the thick crowds.

Queen Garnet stood in front of her mirror, being absolutely drowned by handmaidens and people who claimed to be advising her on her dress. Beatrix, who was acting as the maid of honor and co-captain of the royal guard, covered her face in shame as her Queen was pelted by attention, questions, and advice from women who basically knew nothing.

“Highness, you look best in white,” argued one. “Never break against tradition.”

“But her majesty should show the people that she’s not so one-dimensional!” argued another. “Go for a different style, majesty!”

“These roses are excellent, dear—that is, if you’re living sixty years ago.”

“What’s wrong with roses?” spurted another. “Her mother had them at her wedding, so why should we break the tradition?”

“Roses are so romantic, too!”

“But that flirt of a bridegroom she’s marrying wouldn’t know romance if it came up and kicked the crap out of him. *That*, I would like to see!” Garnet growled and made a very angry face. She directed it to the woman who had insulted her husband-to-be and gave her a scolding to boot.

“I beg your pardon!” she snapped. “I’ll have you know that Zidane *can* be romantic! Besides, how would you know? You’re 47 years old and still unmarried! If you cannot accept this marriage, I suggest you find another country to live in!” The maids paled, and every one of them fell to their knees in forgiveness.

“Please, highness, we’re so sorry for insulting you! Find it in your heart to forgive us!” Garnet shook her head in defeat, and gave Beatrix a tired look. It took every single ounce of strength in the General’s body to not smile back.

“...I suppose I could,” she said, turning her focus back to her maids. “After all, this is a festive day. All right, I forgive you, but you should be more careful with what you say!”

“Of course, highness!” they exclaimed. “Of course! We’re sorry!” And with that, the maids resumed scurrying around, fixing the Queen up for

her wedding day without so much as a peep. Beatrix had to pretend to go to the bathroom in order to avoid laughing out loud in front of her liege. A sudden stinging feeling in her bowels told her that she wouldn't be pretending for long...

...*Wow, I sure have changed*, she thought to herself. Warm water ran over her soapy hands, and a single crimson eye gazed at a mirror that allowed Beatrix to see just *how* she had changed. Physically, she wasn't too different, except she was dressed like a maid of honor/royal guard. A sleeveless white gown, made completely out of silk, covered her body from neck to calve, and a pearl necklace with a pendant attached to it hung over her neck.

Beatrix had been assuming more and more responsibilities as the wedding day drew closer. Garnet had pleased her with being the maid of honor, and Beatrix assumed the position with great humility. She would also be co-captain of the guard, next to Steiner, so she was also the only bride's maid that came equipped with a weapon. For the first time in a long time, she loved the dress she was wearing (Beatrix never dressed up, but only because her duty prevented her from attending events that required dress).

Beatrix applied a little more makeup and combed through her wavy chestnut hair a few more times before approving of herself and leaving. *Yes, I have changed greatly, she thought to herself. I'm much more open with my feelings. I'm starting to think of her majesty as a friend, and not just an impersonal liege. The lack of activity has given me time to socialize more, and since then I have discovered a world of enjoyment I thought only existed in dreams.*

Yes. I have changed much. I wonder who I can attest that to...?

Fittingly enough, as Beatrix left the ladies' restroom, she bumped into Freya again—literally. The two collided, sending each other falling to the floor in an embarrassing, yet somewhat hilarious show. Both knights groaned and rubbed their backs as they struck the ground, and tried to smile despite the pain.

“We really should stop doing this,” muttered Freya with a weak smile. Beatrix silently agreed and helped her friend up. Freya, like Beatrix, was a bride's maid and a member of the royal guard, so she too was dressed the part. She had on a sleeveless white gown of silk just like Beatrix, except hers had just a ghost of green splashed on to discern her from

the other maids. Her head was bare, and her silvery hair had been braided in fine knots.

Needless to say, both knights got lots of attention from the male gender.

“You look great,” complimented Beatrix. Freya nodded her head and mirrored the compliment.

“I haven’t time to talk, friend,” she said. “But surely you understand, what with this wedding and all.”

“Yeah,” smiled the human, “marriages of the century can certainly curtail one’s duties to their friends. Oh well, it’ll all be over come next week.” They both smiled, drunk on happiness, and locked elbows as they marched back to where all the fun was.

“Ohhhhh, look soooooooooo yummy!” Quina quietly crept up on the buffet table, one pasty-white hand slowly snaking towards the snacks and dishes spread out. The long, reddish-pink tongue hanging from its mouth wiggled slightly, and Quina’s advanced nose trembled from the scent of food. The white hand reached a little closer...

“Hey!!” Before Quina could touch the food, Lani slapped the hand away with a powerful smack.

Quina drew back and rubbed its poor hand gingerly.

“Owie! Why you do that? I hungry!”

“Hey, just doing my job!” retorted Lani. “I’ve been given explicit instructions to not allow anyone, least of all the castle cook, to touch the food! So there!” Quina snarled and stuck its tongue out.

“Blehh! You no fun! I go elsewhere!” Before Lani could protest, Quina had scurried off to make trouble elsewhere. She growled, and barked an order to Marcus that he should watch the food while she keep an eye out for Quina’s starving antics. The stout Marcus shrugged, and popped a mini-quiche in his mouth when nobody was looking.

“You’ll do just fine!” assured Eiko as she jumped in the air. “It’s super-easy! I saw it before! All you have to do is carry the rings on the pillow, and give them to Zidane and Garnet when the preacher asks for them!”

“Uhhh...” Vivi adjusted his hat, still not sure whether he was up to the challenge or not. He had been given the important task of ring-bearer; Eiko was flower girl.

“Don’t worry!” she ordered him. “You won’t mess up! I know you’re clumsy, but this is super-

easy!...Hey, tell you what! If you trip and fall, then I'll just run out there and help you up, okay? Then we can walk down the aisle together!" Vivi paused before speaking, and nodded his head in agreement.

"Sure!" he exclaimed. "That sounds nice!"

"Okay then!" squealed Eiko, psyching herself up for her big moment. "Let's get ready! We only have, uh, maybe an hour to go!!" Vivi, who had been stuffed inside his mini-tuxedo for the past two hours, sighed in exhaustion and crumbled to the floor.

"Oh... no..."

Privately, Beatrix gazed at her liege with the eyes of an appraiser. It was her job to pass final judgment on the Queen before she allowed her to go out into the chapel. So far, Garnet looked just like she should at a wedding: she had on the beautiful silky-white bride's gown complete with veil, and a bouquet of red roses were clutched in her hands. Her pendant was around her neck, and her face radiated with joy and love and perfectly-applied makeup.

"Something old" was a sash of her mother's that had been tied around her waist. 'Something new' were the earrings that adorned her lobes, both garnets. "Something borrowed" was a tiara that

belonged to Eiko's mother, and "something blue" was another sash around her waist, this one belonging to her "real" mother (Eiko had spent many months trying to find it, and swore on the Eidolons that it was the genuine article).

"Well?" asked Garnet to her closest friend. Beatrix, her lips pursed in thought, finally smiled and nodded her head.

"It is perfect," she pronounced. "Your mothers would be overjoyed to see it, as would your fathers."

"Thank you," smiled Garnet. She paused, and set the bouquet down briefly as she stepped towards Beatrix. "General?"

"Yes, my Queen?"

"...I have a great favor to ask of you."

"Anything, highness," said Beatrix with a salute. Garnet fidgeted with her dress before giving her request.

"...Can you call me by my name, just once?" Beatrix tilted her head in confusion, smiled, and complied.

"...I shouldn't, but if you order it, then I will be glad to do so, Garnet." Beatrix mentally cringed as

she addressed her liege so informally. She had been in the service of the family of Alexandria for over a decade, so calling Garnet by her birth-name felt very unnatural to her. Still, the smile on Garnet's mouth eased her feelings, and Beatrix returned the smile.

"Thank you, General. I just wanted to hear you call me Garnet once." Beatrix, sensing that if they continued their conversation, they would be late for the wedding, prompted Garnet to make any last-minute preparations. It only took the Queen a few seconds to look over everything, then she was ready for the ceremony.

Butterflies slammed into the stomach of Zidane as he stood in front of the mirror. Blank, his best man, joked that he looked very pretty in his tuxedo, and of course Baku almost died from laughing so much. Rubi, only one of two girls allowed into the groom's dressing room, tried her hardest to keep a straight face but failed; Lani, the other, wore a mask of doubt and disgust on her face.

"...He does look a little silly," she noted. "But let's face it. Monkeys in tuxedos all look funny."

"Hey!" Lani laughed out loud, and slapped her "brother" on the back fiercely.

“It’s true!” she exclaimed. “You look like a penguin with hair in that thing! Garnet will bowl over with laughter!”

“Watch it there, Lani,” pointed Blank emptily. “You’re talking to the future King of Alexandria. He might lock you up for such comments.” He smiled emptily, and Zidane knew that Blank would like nothing better than to see Lani in some prison. The red-headed bounty hunter shrugged, and smiled sweetly as she sauntered over to Blank.

“Sorry, sweetie,” she crooned. “You look better, anyway.”

“Hey!...D’gackk!! HELP!!!”

“You’re on your own, bro!” shouted Marcus as he ran away from the scene. Cinna was following him, claiming that he needed to “prepare” for the wedding, leaving only Baku and Zidane to separate them.

“Hey now, there’s not enough food for a double ceremony!” coughed Baku. Lani’s dark face turned crimson upon hearing that; Blank’s face changed colors as well, though the shade was hardly red.

“Boss!!!”

“Hahahahahahaha!!”

“Nervous...” Steiner fidgeted in his position, along with the other eight Pluto Knights. Across from him were eight of the finest Alexandrian knights, with only two spaces left open for Beatrix and Freya. Steiner had washed and cleaned his armor just for this occasion, and he still cringed from time to time as he thought back. His armor really *had* been quite rusty—ghastly, in fact, but now it was shiny and bright and it made him look considerably better.

His broad face grew a smile as the lovely Freya joined the Alexandrian knights. He waved discreetly at her, and she waved back with a smile. She had to admit, he really did look better with a clean suit of armor; she was gorgeous.

Just then, a slow musical score started, and the wedding officially began with the groom’s men filing into the sanctuary. The guests mumbled and whispered among themselves, and many a girl grew hearts in her eyes as they stared at the gentlemanly ensemble. Zidane followed them, his arm linked with Hilda Falbool’s, and both looked very lovely.

A second, more feminine cast appeared after this, with Beatrix leading them off. Almost every man in

the room, married or otherwise, grew hearts over their heads as they saw the lovely cast, and Zidane had to use something called “restraint” so he wouldn’t wave at the girls and make himself look like a fool. He almost did, but the look Beatrix gave him made sure that he would be good.

Several people let out adorable *awwwwwwws* as Vivi waddled forward, balancing the rings on a pillow. Zidane grinned and silently cheered the little mage, and every girl in the room cooed over how cute he was. Vivi never tripped, not even once, and Zidane gave him a thumbs-up as the little mage approached the dais.

Eiko came next, skipping merrily as she threw petals and flowers. Many people thought she was cute too, and some of the men noticed how she was growing up into a lovely young lady. Suddenly, the summoner tripped and fell, sending her flowers spilling out and earning moans from the crowd. Vivi instantly rushed out to help her, and the crowd grew teary as the mage picked Eiko up and held her hand as he led her across the aisle. Zidane gave an even bigger thumbs-up and even whispered, “You’re the *man*, Vivi!” as the mage stepped up with him.

The crowd hushed as the wedding song was played, and everyone stood up as the bride and the Queen slowly walked into view. Cid Falbool, the closest person she had to a father, guided her up the aisle and towards her groom and future husband and her new life. Garnet's blushed face and serene smile quieted all of Zidane's nerves, and he smiled back as his beautiful bride slowly walked up towards him. Everyone else beamed with pride, especially the two knights who had guarded the Queen for so long.

Cid finally let Garnet join Zidane, proclaiming to Bishop Benedic that it was he who was giving Garnet away (in her father's stead), and left to find his seat so that the procession could continue. Of course, the very second that Bishop Benedic opened his mouth, everyone groaned and wished the ceremony over.

"Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished visitors, great leaders, Lady Beatrix, Lord Steiner, friends, your highness... We are gathered here today to join these two in the bonds of holy matrimony."

Oh, man! whined Zidane mentally. This guy's gonna take forever!! Why can't he just say "Do you" and "Do you" and get it over with? Why does he have to drone on forever? Ugh, probably some royal

custom they go through. I wonder how Garnet's taking all this?

Hm, her eyes are open, but I can tell she's sleeping. Ha, I taught her that one!...Ah, what a wonderful wife she'd make. I just hope I'm ready for all this. I know I'll never be able to give her the kind of life she deserves, or the kind of happiness she needs... But darnit, I sure can try! I'm gonna be the best King this land has ever seen!

Oh, why did she have to mention kids? Me, a father? I can only imagine... Zidane shook his head subtly, ignoring every word that the Bishop was saying. He looked into Garnet's brown eyes, and whispered *I love you*. She smiled, and just like her, she whispered *I love you more*. Zidane chuckled lightly, and stuck his tongue out when he was certain that nobody was watching.

"...repeat after me, please..." mumbled the Bishop, and Zidane snapped to attention. He knew he couldn't miss hearing *this*. It was one of the most important parts of the ceremony!

"I, Zidane Tribal..."

"I, Zidane Tribal..."

“Take thee, Garnet, as my wife and as my Queen.”

“Take thee, Garnet, as my wife and as my Queen.” *Yes, Polly does want a cracker.*

“To have and to hold...” Zidane rolled his eyes, and stood there numbly as he repeated every single word Bishop Benedic said. He meant it all, of course, but there was a kind of empty enthusiasm in the bishop’s voice that made even the most precious moments dull.

“...Til death do us part, amen.”

“Til death do us part, amen.” Garnet smiled, the ring fit perfectly on her finger. So far, so good, and the ceremony was almost over—in theory. Bishop Benedic took a breath, and turned his attention to Garnet.

“And do you, Queen Garnet til Alexandros the 17th...” Suddenly, Bishop Benedic was shoved out of the way, and the sleepy atmosphere died instantly as a familiar sneezing sound erupted from the podium.

“Boss!” shouted Zidane. “What are you *doing*?!”

“Isn’t it obvious?” guffawed Baku. “I’m saving this sorry excuse of a wedding!! Am I the only one who’s bored out of his mind??” He waved his hands in the air, expecting a resounding NO to come from the audience, but got nothing except a weak murmuring.

“I’m bored!” exclaimed Lani suddenly. Baku laughed out loud, and more and more members of Tantalus chanted out their sentiment. Soon, everybody in the sanctuary, even Beatrix and Steiner, admitted to being dulled out of their minds from Bishop Benedic’s mindless dribble.

“Then that settles it!” shouted Baku. He aimed his paw at Zidane, and asked “Do you?”

“Yes!” He then aimed his paw at Garnet.

“Do you?”

“Yes!” she replied, her cheeks rosy. Baku crossed his arms proudly.

“Good! You’re married! Kiss her!!!” Everyone in the audience laughed, for so long and so hard that nobody heard the bride and groom.

“I love you...”

“I love you...!” They held each other tight, and locked lips to consummate the pact of holy matrimony. Of course, the laughter turned into applause and cheering once the two kissed, and it only grew more thunderous as Zidane yanked Garnet off the floor and carried her across the threshold. Everyone clapped, cheered, whistled, and threw flowers and birdseed as the two ran off to the assembly of friends that had been waiting for them outside.

Lani wailed out loud and hugged onto Blank; Marcus, Rubi, and Cinna were all wailing with Baku. Erin and Boyd sang and leaped into the air, and Beatrix was giving Steiner the biggest and tightest hug of her life. She was interrupted by Zidane, who was still holding Garnet.

“Yes... highness?” smiled the rosy General. Zidane grinned a wicked grin and set his wife down.

“Isn’t it tradition for the maid of honor to give the groom a kiss?” he shouted over the cheering. Both Beatrix and Garnet rolled their eyes, and to his surprise, both allowed the kiss to commence. Beatrix’s mouth touched Zidane’s briefly, and the General grinned and gave her new liege a tight embrace. The Queen gave Steiner a peck on the

cheek, and hugged her guardian despite the armor and the red on his face.

Freya, though all by herself in the midst of the beautiful chaos, gave off a warm smile as she applauded her friends. She had already done her fair share of socializing and celebrating, so with her business done, she slowly turned around to leave...

“Not so fast!” shouted a familiar voice. Freya grinned, and turned around to meet the new King of Alexandria.

“Yes, highness?” Zidane rolled his eyes and smiled.

“Please... just call me Zidane!”

“All right, Zidane then,” grinned Freya. She gazed at her friend, looking silly as always, and nearly laughed out loud as she saw him pout. “Now what?”

“Can I get a hug?” he whimpered. Freya grinned in defeat, and reached forward to embrace her friend. She suddenly pressed her furry mouth to his, and pulled away before he knew what had happened. Garnet, who would normally be angry to see any woman kiss her new husband, literally rolled on the floor in laughter.

“Now I can tell my grandkids that I kissed a King!” exclaimed Freya. Zidane growled playfully, and placed his arm across her shoulder as he guided Freya back into the festivities, where she belonged.

That night, only one individual was miserable—but they had a right to be so.

“Oooooohhhhhh..... me so full... Should not have eaten so much...”

Three of the calmest and most peaceful months passed since the marriage of Zidane and Queen Garnet. In that space of time, the young Genome—who had once been as familiar with royal customs as he was familiar with the anatomy of a toad—had slowly become one of Alexandria’s more “interesting” Kings. Zidane was instructed in the royal ways mostly by Garnet, though her teaching usually just passed right through his head.

Because he was so unfamiliar with royal customs, Zidane would often make ambassadors, visitors, or well-wishers rather uncomfortable whenever they came to visit. His manners and speech, though gradually improving, were still far too rough and

coarse, and oftentimes Garnet's patience was stretched beyond normal units of measurement.

Then again, never before had a more honest and down-to-earth King been on the throne. In the short period of time that had passed since his coronation ceremony, Zidane had already gained a following from the people. He had become famous enough during the Mist Wars, but as King, he became even more loved. At first, it was understandable how apprehensive everyone felt about the ex-thief being King, but now their doubts were quelled.

Beatrix and Steiner, to the new King's surprise, gave him their full support and unquestioned loyalty. Seeing Beatrix kneel to the Genome was a sight in its own, but having Steiner bow before a former "enemy" was almost funny. He, more than anyone else, had treated Zidane the worst, and although the young man took Steiner's humility with a surprising amount of maturity, it was still a strange site to see Steiner lower himself to the "monkey-boy".

All in all, it was a peaceful time for Alexandria kingdom, and she deserved every second of it. The past few years had been extra-hard on her resolve, what with the kingdom nearly getting wiped off the face of the map multiple times—from without and

within. It seemed as if the forces of evil expanded all their energies just to topple Alexandria: first Kuja and Brahne's efforts, then Garland and Necros, then The Foe had appeared to worsen things more. Even so, Alexandria had withstood it all, and even seemed to get better after every near-death experience.

But now, there were no more enemies to fight. No new evils were around, there was no strife in the world, and a comforting blanket of silky tranquility had finally wrapped the kingdom in the warm embrace of serenity it had sorely needed.

And Freya was so bored, she was going stark-raving mad.

Ever since her recovery from depression, Freya had assigned herself as chief of security in Alexandria. With her watching the streets and corridors of the kingdom, the young royals felt as if their land would truly be safe, and it was—but *too* safe for Freya. She had not been head of security for long—she had begun her occupation shortly after the wedding—but in that short period of time, her job had lost its sparkle, and the challenge had dulled down, and she was so restless that she was going crazy.

Peace is the ultimate pleasure, she reminded herself. Wars are the most horrible events that one can experience. They take away so many wonderful things, leaving only ashes and skeletons and destruction. The last great war that this world suffered sucked nearly everything I loved away, and the purpose of this most recent invasion seemed only to finish off what Kuja started. I have lost everything in the war, but now that there is peace, I may be happy.

However... As masochistic as it sounds, peace is always dull. I am grateful for the citizens of Alexandria for taking me in, and I am thankful for the King and Queen that they have found this line of work for me. I owe this kingdom so much, but if I do not have something worthwhile to occupy my time, then I shall just go to pieces!

Thus, owing this land so much, surely there is a better way for me to repay them! Chief of security is an honorable position, but it is not one that suits me. I have been watching these streets now for the past three months, and I have not seen anything more threatening than a few desperate muggers. I have much to be thankful for—but if I am not placed somewhere where my skills would be put to better use, I'll go mad!

That is, if I haven't already...

That last thought elicited a brief chuckle out of Freya, but she was not in the mood for humor. She was perfectly serious when she thought of her inactivity bearing madness, and was even more serious when she mentally swore to pay back the kingdom for its grace. Freya had been accepted as a citizen of Alexandria before she got her security job, so she was also under the rule of Zidane and Garnet—which may or may not have meant that she could no longer approach them so casually.

She had considered asking her two friends to give her another line of work, but as polite and classy as she was, she thought the notion would be received as rude. *Don't get me wrong!* she had anticipated to say upon hearing their reaction. *It's not that I'm ungrateful! It's just that I feel as if I can benefit this kingdom more in another position.*

“Ha, like what?” she snorted to herself (Freya had conversational battles with herself every now and then). “The only things I’m good at are fighting and dancing for the sandstorm. What else *could* I do?” As she pondered over things, Freya decided that it would ultimately be better to go over to the castle and ask the King and Queen herself. At least it

was better than wasting away out in the streets, and there was always the possibility that she would be placed in a worthwhile position—

Whatever that was.

“...It’s not that I’m ungrateful,” insisted Freya, the words of but a few hours ago coming out for her friends to hear; in other words, it was *deja vous* to her. “It’s just that I feel as if I can benefit this kingdom more in another position.”

“I can see your point,” said Garnet. “Chief of security is a very noble occupation, and one that would normally suit you. However, as we have all noticed, we’re in a very wonderful time of peace here, so there’s little need for security.”

“Oh, then it looks like you’re out of work,” smiled Freya wryly, her eyes locked onto Steiner. He grumbled, but otherwise remained silent. Zidane chuckled lightly.

“Yeah... But, hey, I’m sure we can find you something to do. What’re you good at, besides fighting and dancing?”

“That’s it,” she pointed. “Sorry... my uncle was a fighter himself, and that’s the only thing he knew. I

learned how to dance for the sandstorms of Cleyra from my aunt.”

“You could always be an exotic dancer,” grinned Zidane, and even though they knew he was teasing, both Freya and Garnet gave him cold looks. He noticed them, and let out an innocent, “Whaaaaat?? I was just kidding!”

“.....Anyway,” snorted Freya, shoving aside his comments for the time being, “I would be grateful if you could find some type of work for me—whatever you think I’ll be best at.” The royal couple nodded their heads, and suddenly, out of the blue, Garnet got an idea.

“Oh! I know what you could do for us!”

“Yes?”

“...There’s always a need for someone to train the soldiers,” she began. “The recent invasion has been indication enough that Alexandria needs to be more prepared. We have a small number of trainers on hand, but we could certainly use one more. If you feel like you could be up to the task...” Freya smiled, and kneeled to the floor as honorably as she knew how.

What a perfect opportunity! Freya had never considered becoming a trainer for soldiers, but now that she knew the option was available, she was eager to take it. Alexandria would obviously have an insatiable demand for them, for there would always be soldiers, as there would always be wars, so if Freya took the job, she would pretty much be set for life. Besides, maybe incorporating her spear-fighting techniques to the sword-adjusted Alexandrians would be a nice change of pace.

Plus, she would be working with Beatrix.

“Your majesty, that is a marvelous idea!” exclaimed Freya. “I could not have wished for a better job myself! If it pleases you, I should like to take this job—in fact, if possible, I’d like to start right away.”

“Whoa, not so fast there, babe!” exclaimed Zidane (both Garnet and Freya let that comment slide). “Why all the rush? There’s no need to hurry, and besides, there’s a big holiday tomorrow. You should take these next two days off... you know? Take things easy, rest, relax, enjoy yourself... the works!” He smiled, and Garnet placed her soft hand on his. Freya shrugged, and stood to her feet.

“All right, if you say so. But when I *do* start...”

“Oh, don’t worry,” assured Zidane. “You’ll be placed where all the fresh recruits are.”

“You mean the beginners?” she spat. Freya made a nasty face, and waved her hand as if to pass the offer up. “Ugh, no offense but no thanks. Pardon my rudeness, but I’m surprised you have the gall to *place* me in such an atmosphere.”

“It’s Alexandrian rules,” shrugged Garnet sympathetically. “No matter how skilled a trainer is, they’re always placed with beginners first, just so we know how well they perform. Don’t worry, with your skills, you’ll be at the top by the end of the week.” Freya snorted, and crossed her arms in irritation. Placing her with fresh soldiers was like asking Dr. Tot to teach people whose only medical experience was applying band-aids. She was so skilled that she could have kept the advance guard on their toes...

“...If you insist,” she finally said with a grunt. “But I must warn you, my expectations are very high. Don’t come whining to me if your soldiers complain about my rigorous schedule.”

“The tougher, the better!” came a familiar voice from across the room. Freya smiled and several of the attendants and the lower-ranking soldiers saluted

as General Beatrix came into the room, and she herself kneeled before speaking.

“Pardon my intrusion, my lieges,” she began. “I seem to have arrived early for my report. I overheard Lady Freya, and I must also express sentiment on your decision. Having her train our novices would be an excellent idea. I feel as if these new recruits are far too sluggish in actual battle, and having an experienced dragoon like Lady Freya to keep them on their toes would do this kingdom well.” Freya grinned as her friend poured a few praises out, and the tiniest of red hues came to the flesh beneath her fur, giving her face a pink glow.

“Well, if Lady Bea here says it’s a good idea, then I guess we’d better sign you up, eh?” said Zidane in his usual tone. Freya mutely shrugged, and kneeled one more time to thank her lieges.

“And please!” insisted the King. “Just call us by our names! We’re your friends and you’re ours, and besides, it just don’t feel right to hear you talk to us so formally!” She shrugged again, as if deep down inside she could really care less, and took her leave of them without using more than a few words. She flashed Beatrix one brief smile before leaving the throne room completely.

“And that goes for you too, General!” spat Zidane. This got her attention, and Beatrix jerked around to give her new King a questioning look. “No more ‘highness’ this or ‘your majesty’ that! Come on, Bea! We’re your friends here! You don’t need to address us so formally!” Beatrix’s face grew a little dark, but the sadness in her sigh was even darker, like a cloud just before a storm.

“...If it is your desire, then I shall refrain, my King,” she said slowly. “But please, majesty, if you ever listen to anything that I say, please hear me out now.” Beatrix swallowed, and fell to her knees in classical begging position. She even clasped her hands, as if in prayer.

“...I love this land,” she began, her voice soft and deliberate. “Alexandria took me in when I had no home, and it has raised me and supported me for almost all of my life. I have been in the service of the royal family ever since I became a knight—not because of ambition or power, but because I wanted to repay her for taking me in. I love this kingdom, and its royal family, and I have pledged eternal fealty and loyalty to all who sit on this throne. I have been given a home here, and because of my eternal gratitude, I find it my greatest pleasure to serve this land any way I can. Please, sire, I beg you: do not

take away the honor of addressing you with your formal title. If you do I will comply, but only because of my duty. But if you truly want me to be happy, then please... do not deny me this simple pleasure. Please, my lord..."

By now, Beatrix's passionate speech had moved even Steiner to tears, and he nearly screamed out how he felt the same way, but Zidane beat him to the punch. The young lad quickly ran over to give his servant and bodyguard a tight embrace, and between his hundreds of apologies, he begged her to stand and be proud, and to not cry. She tried.

He was joined by Garnet, who affirmed the fact that, though Beatrix was more than a bodyguard and a soldier to them, they would never dare try to take away any pleasure she took in her line of service. Denying Beatrix the ability to respect those who gave her a home would be like denying her breath or health, so after a little tears and a few hugs, the King and Queen apologized and let her do as she willed.

"Thank you," she said as she stood, half her face scarred with tears. "And, I do consider you friends, both of you. But, you are also my King and my Queen, and my respect runs as deep as my love.

Please, let me serve you, and you shall have my thanks.”

“Y-yes, o-of c-course,” sniffled Zidane. “I-I’m s-sorry f-for s-suggesting s-such a th-thing...”

“Think nothing of it,” she sighed. “You were just being you, and I was just being me. Thankfully, we see eye-to-eye on this topic at least.”

Freya smiled and waved as Beatrix left the throne room, and her friend gave back a smile that seemed to require effort. The General looked a little tired, and her face was still moist from the tear that had marked it. Her smile seemed to take a lot of her energy, and from the way she walked, Beatrix had gone through something really intense back there.

“You okay?” asked Freya. The sweet smile she received comforted her worries.

“I don’t think I have ever been better,” replied the knight. A pause, and she said, “...Do you want to go somewhere to talk?”

“Yes, of course,” agreed Freya. A talk seemed in order right then, though the topic might not have steered toward what happened in the throne room. It was none of Freya’s business, despite the fact that she had waited all this time for Beatrix to come out.

Still, the idea of having a private chat with her friend seemed nice. Without another moment's hesitation, both women walked out of the castle and into the crowded streets of Alexandria. There was going to be a big holiday tomorrow, so they would have all of that day and the next to catch up. That was okay—they had earned the rest.

Together, Beatrix and Freya left Alexandria Castle and entered into the thick crowds of the town. They had the rest of that day to do whatever they desired, as well as the next, for it was a fairly big holiday tomorrow. Alexandrians would be crowding the streets, which meant that the two warriors would have incredible trouble getting home. The fact that they were both celebrities didn't make things any better.

Through some miracle, they managed to wade through the sea of people without doing any harm to themselves, or anyone else. Beatrix and Freya were both famous faces, and not just because of the recent events. Both warriors had done incalculable services to the kingdom, from restoring it after the Mist Wars and saving it from The Foe, to vanquishing monsters in her most dire time of need. Even minor deeds,

such as slaying a certain monster or even performing a certain duty, got them well-noticed.

It was a holiday tomorrow, so of course the streets would be jam-packed with citizens dashing around, trying to stock up on gifts and meals for the following day. It was almost as if a festival was going on: there were even a few performers out on the streets, and because of the sharp eyes of the two ladies, no thief or pickpocket seemed to be within range. All in all, it was reasonably peaceful, considering how bustling everything was.

Though they drew more attention to themselves than Lowen after his most recent performance, both knights managed to swim through the thick bog of living creatures, but had to squeeze themselves into Freya's home. The door barely budged at all, so massive was the crowds outside, but when they did wiggle into the small abode, they nearly stumbled onto the floor in exhaustion.

Despite their minor ordeal, both ladies wore silly grins on their faces. They took a little breather to make sure that they were both still in one piece, then stood to their feet. Since this was her house, Freya offered Beatrix a drink, and since it was so close to lunchtime anyway, she decided it would be best to

set the table. Beatrix was still not used to being served, especially by someone who used to be an enemy, but she played her part as best she could and allowed Freya to do *her* duty, just as Zidane and Garnet allowed Beatrix to do hers.

Freya first emerged from the kitchen with the requested drinks. She didn't care for alcohol, and neither did Beatrix, so instead they both had a tall glass of very fancy Burmecian tea (Freya had memorized the recipe from years studying under her aunt's cooking). She then went back into the kitchen for plates and napkins, and was soon zigzagging between table and kitchen like a culinary yo-yo.

Beatrix watched her friend in quiet amazement, and found Freya to be a surprising servant. The Burmecian had never told of her cooking skills, which were nothing short of average, but the way she served Beatrix was amazing. The food itself was nothing to get excited about, and a few questionable morsels made Beatrix's face turn colors. *Those* would have to be reserved for Freya. But the service was first-rate!

Finally (it only took the dragoon about five minutes to set everything up), Freya emerged from the kitchen with the last piece of crockery, and set it

down for both women to enjoy. She then seated herself, and began piling on the food. Neither woman had spoken a word since arriving in the house, save for Freya's offer of a drink, but with the noise outside, their silence was understandable. Besides, they had all the rest of that day and the next to talk. Six or seven minutes of silence would be nice.

"...So what would you like to talk about?" asked Freya as she handed Beatrix a bowl of corn. The knight spooned up everything she thought she would eat, and took a swig of tea before answering. The drink itself was delicious: chilled, with a drop of lemon juice, and enough spices to make her head swim. She smiled and mentally approved.

"...Your past, if you don't mind," said the knight. Freya nodded her head, and kept her food at bay for the time.

"All right. I suppose it seems fair. But I must warn you, it's not all wine and roses. There are parts that I would normally never tell anyone."

"That's all right," replied Beatrix. "I've had my fair share of bad experiences. I don't think there's anything you could say that would really shock me, but go ahead."

“All right,” sang Freya, as if trying to give Beatrix one last warning. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you!”

“Is it really that bad?”

“No,” smiled the Burmecian, “but I might as well prepare you anyway.”

“...I... don’t remember a lot about my childhood... But one thing stands out to me, more so than anything else I can remember. Something very traumatic happened to me when I was just three years old, and it had such a deep impact on my life that I remember it to this very day.”

“Wow,” muttered Beatrix. “Can you really remember that far?” Freya shrugged.

“You’d think that I wouldn’t be able to. But my uncle, who adopted me, told me to never forget about the experience. I mostly remember things through what he told me.”

“Ah. So what happened to you when you were three?” Freya sighed, and took a sip of tea before answering. Beatrix could tell that Freya was having problems talking about her past, and she didn’t want her new friend to feel forced. She nearly apologized for asking—Freya had been through enough

emotional trauma already, and to add more fuel to the fire might not be a good idea—but Freya resumed speaking, albeit with a hushed voice.

“...When I was three years old, my village burned to the ground,” she said quietly. “I... don’t remember much, but... I do know that my parents were killed in that fire.”

“That’s terrible,” whispered a very-genuine General. Beatrix felt sympathy for her friend, but also empathy. She *knew* what it was like to lose a family... “You know, my family and village was burned in a fire as well.”

“You don’t say...” Freya tilted her head, and suddenly remembered that there was food before her. The two ladies shared an awkward smile and whetted their appetites a little. The small bits of information they had both received about each other were obviously very personal and intimate, and to be able to hear even this much was a great honor. Both women satisfied their hunger a little bit before talking more.

“...How old were you when your family and friends were killed?” asked Freya.

“Five, I think. I guess that’d be around the time your village was burned as well. I’m about two years older than you.”

“Right...” Freya rubbed her fuzzy chin with her hand, and asked a more revealing question. “...Do you remember the name of your hometown? I probably couldn’t recall it for the life of me, and my uncle died of natural causes before he could tell me.”

“I’m not too sure, either,” muttered Beatrix. “I definitely remember the name of the man that burned my town.”

“Me too,” said Freya gravely. They both spoke at the exact same time, and to their surprise, what they said was the exact same name:

“Kyahar Ignus.” Both ladies raised their eyebrows in surprise.

“You too, huh?” they said simultaneously. Beatrix chuckled lightly.

“I suppose it’s no big surprise,” she said. “From the history lessons I took, Kyahar Ignus loved burning things, especially towns. He’d come in and loot everything, rape a few women, then burn

everything he could set fire to. He was a horrible man...”

“Indeed,” agreed Freya. “And finding survivors of his attacks is hard to do.” Both ladies suddenly grew silent, and stared into emptiness as they absorbed more of each other’s past. Slowly, Freya dug into her meal, and quietly ate as she let her brain stew. Beatrix, whose appetite had left her suddenly, leaned back in her chair and folded her arms across her chest. Her mind continued running on its course, and slowly, her minutes of thought paid off as a revelation came to her.

“I just remembered the name of my home town.”

“Eh?” Freya looked up from her meal and gave her friend an inquisitive glance.

“Yeah. It just came to me. I think it was, ah... D’negel, or something like that.”

“D’negel...” Freya sniffed, and smiled eerily as the name was tossed around her head. She chuckled once, and shook her head in amazement. “...You know... Beatrix... I... ah... think... D’negel was... the name of... hahaha... Yes, I think it was the name of... *my* hometown, too...”

“You don’t say...” Beatrix swallowed, and gave Freya her most hollow stare. Her single red eye burrowed deep into Freya’s green ones, and both ladies held the stare as they slowly began thinking wild thoughts. Coincidence after implausible coincidence had come at them, and a thought crept across their mind.

“Do you think it’s possible...?” whispered Freya. “...Do you think...”

“We grew up in the same town...?” offered Beatrix. “...Do you believe...”

“...We knew each other?”

“...I... recall a young brown-haired girl, crying for her family...”

“I... think I saw a rat-girl there, too... at the funerals...”

“I... knew her?” Both women shivered, and grew slightly ill from so many revealing thoughts. The possibility was incredible: two companions, separated by the flames of destruction... Two long-lost friends, brought together by war—first through hate, then through friendship... A powerful bond, rooting back to childhood, bent and twisted but never fully broken.....

Beatrix gasped.

“It’s true!!!” she exclaimed. “All of it! We *did* grow up in the same town! Our parents *were* killed by the same man! We were even at the funerals, comforting each other...!”

“It *is* true...” whispered Freya. She swallowed. “We grew up together, you and I. You were my best friend in that village. It was only for a little while, but..... Oh, Beatrix! I... I can’t believe it!!!” The two ladies smiled joyfully at each other, and rushed towards each other with the enthusiasm of two old friends who had not seen each other in years. They cried as they embraced, and shared the same happy sentiment. But they had a right to be happy. After all, they had not seen each other in twenty-three years.

“Beatrix!”

“Freya!”

“I...”

“Missed you...”

“Bored...”

“I know... There’s been nothing going on since the wedding...” The two guards standing at the front gate of Alexandria sighed, and leaned up against the wall so their bodies wouldn’t suddenly fall into a slump. They literally had nothing to do except stand there and watch for enemies, and although it seemed like a sweet job at first—having to get paid to stand and watch the world outside—it soon became so tiresome and tedious that not even all the money in the world could compensate them.

As the guards stood at attention (more or less), their appetite for excitement was aroused as two suspicious strangers came into view, one of them very tall and intimidating, the other hiding behind a green cloak. The guards both grabbed their weapons, and all the hours spent doing nothing were suddenly thrown out the window.

“Halt!” they cried. “Who goes there?” The two figures approached the gate, and were courteous enough to stop instead of picking a fight. The tall one grunted, and crossed his arms impatiently.

“Move,” he said. The guards, who were both shorter and weaker than the man before them, shivered in their boots as they pointed spears at the tall man.

“I... identify y-yourself... s-sir...”

“I need to get through,” muttered the man in a flat voice. The guards quaked in fear, but held their ground.

“W-we... w-we c-cannot l-let you p-pass...” The tall man mumbled something, smiled once, and slowly began cracking his knuckles. The sheer size of his hands sent chills down the guard’s bodies.

“I’ll ask you nicely one more time,” said the tall man emotionlessly. “Move.”

“...N-no,” whimpered the guards. They both felt like they had just signed their death papers, but duty was duty. Dying to protect the kingdom was just one of the requirements.

“I must speak with the Queen,” insisted the intimidating one.

“Th-that m-makes you even m-more s-s-suspicious...” quaked the guards. The tall man growled, and took one single step towards the gate, causing both guards to back away in terror.

“Y-yikes!! D-don’t come any cl-closer!!”

“...Looks like we’ll have to force our way in,” mumbled the tall man to his companion. The one

cloaked in green sighed and clicked his tongue.

“Is that the only thing you know, Coral? Brute force?” The taller man shrugged haphazardly, and stepped forth to shove the guards away. He only got a few steps into the town before being stopped by an even more irritating voice, and the *clank-clank* sound that came with it told the tall man that this next obstacle would not be quite as easy to pass over.

Adelbert Steiner, having seen the incident, came storming forth with his armor squeaking as always. He demanded in no peaceful terms what was going on, and who these two strangers were. The tall man, the one known as Coral, merely crossed his arms and coolly leaned against a post, leaving his companion to explain everything.

“Settle down, Knight of Pluto,” sighed the man in green. “We’re not here to start an uprising or anything. In fact, if you let us talk to the Queen, what we say may actually save the kingdom. It is your duty to report any threats to the Queen, right?” Steiner growled, and froze for a moment as he tried to think his way out of the situation. As always, he fell short of perfection.

“...Why, you...!...If you tell *me* what this urgent news is, then I’ll relay it to her majesty!”

“Sorry, it’s for her ears only,” shrugged the man in green. He had an exceptionally thick accent, probably one from lands farther up north, though nobody could ever say for certain. Only his eyes could be seen behind the cloak he wore.

“Why you—!” Steiner became so hopping-mad that he was tempted to dash forward and arrest the two invaders right on the spot, but was stopped by the arrival of his lieges. He kneeled as they made their way through the kingdom, and tried his best to explain the situation.

“What’s up, Rusty George?” asked Zidane. “You find some no-good people around here?”

“That I have, highness!” beamed the knight. “Observe! I caught these two snooping around! They claim to have some kind of important information, but I smell a rat—erm, no offense to Lady Freya.” Zidane frowned in irritation and rolled his eyes. He had expected more out of his new servant; after all, he easily recognized one of the men.

“Oh, for the love of all things good and sacred, it’s just old Amarant!” Steiner tilted his head in confusion, and took a closer look at one of the men. Tall, muscular, silent but deadly, with a mane of shaggy red hair hiding his eyes... Yes, there was no doubt—this was Amarant.

“Hmph, I see,” he snorted. “But still! He’s still suspicious!!”

“Whatever,” snorted the flaming one. He lazily turned his head to the two monarchs, and almost smiled. “Huh. You, a King? Well, I guess I was wrong. Sorry to miss the wedding, but we had business to take care of.”

“We?” said Garnet. She noticed the second man with them, and asked who he was. The man with the cloak sniffed, and removed his covering with a grand flair. Behind this façade of green was a face that had obviously seen younger days. His dark hair had streaks of gray running through it, and even his short, pointy beard had some silver in it. His piercing eyes were very dark, and looked like they could bore holes through steel. Though he had a few wrinkles on his face from age, the man still had a definite look of awareness and cunning to him.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance,” said the man. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to investigate something. Don’t move; it’ll make it easier on both of us.” And without hearing another word from anyone else, the dark-haired men stepped towards Garnet, and stared at her hard. He reached for her face (and several knights reached for their swords), and carefully dug his dark eyes into hers. His fingers brushed against her forehead gingerly, then he clasped a shuck of the Queen’s dark hair to his nose, and inhaled deeply.

Needless to say, his actions caused many people to stare back in surprise.

“Ah,” said the man with a smile, “I see. You’re not of royal blood.”

“Huh? How... I mean, why do you say that?” The man smiled wryly, and crossed his arms.

“No need to pretend, Garnet. I know who you are. Your parents... they’re both dead, am I right?” Garnet stared back at the strange man in confusion, and slowly confirmed his question. “Ah. And... your original home was Madain Sarai, am I correct?”

“.....Yes...”

“Hm. And... let me guess... you were adopted by the royal family... ahhhh... when you were around... six, right?” Garnet’s eyes suddenly widened—in fact, everyone within earshot stood there in shock. So far, everything the man had estimated was true, but there was no logical explanation for how he could know so much without having met Garnet before. The Queen’s secret was limited to the kingdom and a few loyal friends outside of it, and Amarant wasn’t one to tell such trivial secrets. But...

“How...?” was all she could say.

“Did I know?” smiled the man. He tapped his head and gave the Queen his most secretive smirk. “That’s my secret. But really, any old fool could tell you’re not of royal birth. First of all, I felt your horn—the one on your forehead, I mean. The people that cut it off did a very good job, but there’s still a very tiny impression left over. I felt that. And although you do have a definite royal smell to you, your original scent comes from lands foreign. Not all the perfumes in the world could mask your true origin.”

“But how did you know all that?!” insisted Garnet, who was almost to the point of screaming. The man grinned.

“Like I said, that’s my secret. For now, you’ll just have to—”

“AH!!! I know who you are!!!” shrieked Zidane suddenly. The older man sighed, and clicked his tongue in frustration.

“Do you, now...”

“Yeah!!! I heard about you from Baku!! You’re..... you’re the one they call ‘The Hunter’, am I right?” All eyes turned towards the older man, and he smiled and bowed with great extravagance.

“At your service.”

“Oh, WOW!!!” squealed Zidane. “This is unreal!! I thought you were just a myth! I never thought I’d actually get to *meet* the legendary Hunter, face-to-face like this!! Oh... wow!!!!!!”

“Hahahahaha!! A little zealous for a King, eh?” Zidane’s face lit up, but everyone else was just plumb confounded. Steiner, as always, was more angry than confused.

“What is going on here?!” he demanded. “Sire, do you know this questionable chap?”

“*Know* him?!” squealed the King. “Are you *kidding*?! This guy’s, like, the greatest thief to ever

live! He's The *Hunter*, for crying out loud!!! Haven't you guys ever heard of the legendary Hunter??”

“...Oh yeah!!” exclaimed a nearby woman. “I know who you're talking about! So that's him, eh? I thought he'd be a lot older than that...”

“I heard he can hear the heartbeat of a mouse across a continent!”

“I heard he can see the top of a mountain as clear as the hand in front of my face!”

“I heard he can feel emotions just by holding his palms in the air!”

“I heard... I heard... I heard...”

“Please stop,” chuckled The Hunter. “I didn't come here to get praised...”

“Sure you didn't,” grumbled Amarant, who had become forgotten in the conversation. All eyes turned towards the flaming one, and the royal couple suddenly remembered why they were all out there in the first place.

“Oh yeah!” said Zidane. “Weren't you gonna tell us something?”

“Well, we would have gotten our task done a lot sooner if Sir Rust-A-Lot here had let us in...” Zidane smiled brilliantly as he heard his idol call Steiner by that nickname, but the knight himself was far from happy.

“Hey!!”

“Steiner...” Garnet calmed Steiner down like a soothing word calmed down an angry horse, and the Queen of Alexandria turned towards the two men. “What have you to tell us?”

“Bad news,” said Amarant. He turned to the Hunter, and asked, “You want me to tell her?”

“You’re too blunt,” replied the man with twinkling eyes. “You’d better let me tell her.” Amarant shrugged carelessly and allowed the Master Mercenary to tell all.

“...Bad news, highness,” began The Hunter, and Garnet’s ears opened. “It seems as if there’s been a recent streak of invasions occurring everywhere. Towns and cities all over the world are being attacked, or are on the verge of being attacked. Esto Gaza, Black Mage Village, Madain Sarai, Daguerro... they’re all suffering...”

“That’s horrible!” hissed Zidane. “You mean to tell us that there’s another enemy out there?”

“Yeah,” answered the Hunter. “But I’m afraid that this battle isn’t going to be nearly as easy as the last skirmish you all had. This new enemy is a hundred times worse than that Foe chap that came knocking a few weeks ago.” Garnet shivered as she listened to the Hunter’s words, and two quivering hands covered her mouth.

The Foe’s reign of terror had been brief but bloody. He had orchestrated a large-scale attack on Mognet Central, the communications capitol of the world. He had also destroyed Burmecia completely, and had even set his sights on Alexandria. This last attack was The Foe’s final assault, and although the battle itself was brief, it let a lot of destruction and tears in its wake.

And now, there was news of somebody even worse than him...

“...Who is it?” asked Garnet firmly. The Hunter paused to deliberate, and gazed at the quiet Amarant.

“You wanna tell her, Coral?”

“Yeah...” Amarant lazily stood up, and sauntered over to Garnet as if he had all the time in the world.

The news he would give her would change all of Alexandria for the next few weeks; in fact, it might have even changed the whole world... But as always, Amarant revealed the most startling news in the briefest and calmest of terms.

“...It’s the Fire General,” he said, and Garnet’s shock was multiplied a hundred fold. She shivered horribly, as if all the terrors of the Mist Wars were happening once again, and nearly sank to the ground. She cried, she actually cried in horror, and tried denying it.

“No... it can’t be him... Please, God, let it be anybody but him...”

“Sorry,” shrugged Amarant, but the apology did nothing to help Garnet’s horror. She had heard malicious tales about the powerful Fire General—how he incinerated everything he came across, how his ruthlessness had brought a nation to its knees, and how the barren wastes of the Lost Continent were still being credited to him.

“It’s... not possible...” whispered Garnet fearfully. “No... please... any fate but this...”

“It’s true,” affirmed The Hunter. “The Fire General—Kyahar Ignus—is back.” Queen Garnet of

Alexandria shuddered in horror, and not even all her royal training, nor the love given to her by Zidane or her bodyguards or her friends would be able to comfort her. She had heard too many horror stories about the infamous Fire General, and each and every one was true.

Still, she somehow managed to compose herself, and with a voice still quivering with fear, she uttered only one helpless prayer:

“Heaven help us all...”

To be continued...

7. Holocaust

Part Seven: Holocaust

General Kyahar Naked Ignus...

“The Fire General”...

The words brought a definite sense of fear, and for good reason.

General Ignus was many things to many people, but to broaden the perspective, he was a monster. Physically, he was human on the outside, and a rather middle-aged one at that. But beneath the thin layer of mortal skin there laid a monster, a wicked demon, who held no more love over human life than he did value the tissue he used to blow his nose on. Ignus was cruel, and tyrannical, and very powerful, and up until a decade before the birth of Queen Garnet, he had been an apocalyptic force from which no nation could escape.

To Beatrix and Freya, Ignus resembled ultimate terror and loss. It was he who had been directly responsible for the destruction of their hometown of D’negel; it was he who burned their birth-parents to

death, and their birth-houses, and any brothers or sisters or friends they might have had. It was he who permanently scarred their childhood, and forced them into a life as orphans when they were five and three, respectively.

Ignus had literally destroyed the past of both warriors, and although things eventually turned out for the better, both women still held ancient memories of their nearly-forgotten past... memories of a sea of flames, and laughing men, and their fathers being mowed down by arrows, and their mothers being raped and garroted. Houses turned black, the ground became wasted, and above it all, the screams of two young girls could just barely be heard.

Suddenly, Beatrix snapped out of her daze. She didn't even realize that her mind had wandered off; she was too concentrated on Ignus, and her past, and her pain. But something had broken her out of this daze—no, *someone* had. It was Freya, and her hand was gently clasping Beatrix's in support. Beatrix looked into the eyes of her long-lost best friend, and although neither one had the nerve to smile, they were both comforted by the fact that the other lady was equally nervous.

It's okay, said Freya mentally. I'm scared too. Beatrix moved her mouth so that it almost resembled a smile, and squeezed Freya's hand. Quite a bit of time had passed since Amarant and The Hunter had announced to the world that the Fire General was back, and Garnet had yet to give any orders. But that was okay—she, too, must have been shocked about hearing everything that had gone on outside.

Ironic, thought Beatrix bitterly. We began to detest peace so much, and now this comes along... What kind of masochism is this? Do I... do we... hate peace? She growled to herself, and let go of Freya's hand. She placed her palm on the shoulder of her Queen and her friend, and cast her fears aside as she once again prepared herself for war.

“Your orders, highness?”

The time—Fifteen minutes after Amarant and The Hunter first arrived.

The place—Alexandria Town main square.

The players—Queen Garnet, the ruler of Alexandria who must draw up plans for a battle; General Beatrix and Lady Freya, two warriors and long-lost friends who serve her; Amarant Coral and The Hunter, two mysterious mercenaries.

Status—Conflict.

“If we’ve learned anything from the previous invasion,” began the Queen, “then we’ve learned that it’s unwise to leave Alexandria unprotected.” With all her naïveté and bright innocence gone, the Queen of Alexandria now had the look of a wartime General. Before her was a large map of the world, with several tokens representing each of the endangered countries scattered about. She used a pointer to direct attention to each of the countries.

“The last time an invasion hit us, we were totally unprepared,” she continued. “We had sent many of our finest warriors out to quell a major conflict at Mognet Central, which then left Alexandria open for an attack. We believe that this was the enemy’s plan all along—to draw out our main forces on a wild goose chase, then rush in and attack before they could be summoned back.

“This time, though, there is more than one point of attack,” she pointed. “Madain Sari, Esto Gaza, Black Mage Village, Daguerro, and Conde Petie are all being overrun by small yet formidable forces. This is obviously a more serious invasion than what we faced earlier. Now, I have brought together a regime of my finest strategists, and they seem to

have come up with a plan.” Garnet nodded her head, silently ushering in three of her most trusted councilors, Bosh, Mash, and Gash.

“As you can see here,” pointed Bosh, “most of the attacks are concentrated on the Forbidden Continent: Conde Petie, Madain Sari, and Black Mage Village. Representatives Eiko Carol, #266 and Mikoto, and Ghiott have informed us via Mognet that they are holding out as best they can, but since there are more attacks centered around this area than anywhere else, I have advised Garnet that we move in here first.”

“Our next target is Daguerro,” said Gash. “Because of its vast archives, to lose it would be inexcusable. Daguerro has no army, so we should send our most powerful forces there. After that would be Esto Gaza, and because of weather and distance, we have saved it for last.”

“We obviously cannot send out the entire Alexandrian Army,” grumbled Mash. “King Zidane and Queen Garnet have made contact with Lindblum, Treno, Dali, and the forces mentioned by Bosh, and they have agreed to send their own respective forces. We can expect a fleet of airships to arrive in Daguerro in two days, and a naval fleet

in Esto Gaza in a week. That just leaves the Forbidden Continent.”

“Thanks, guys,” said Zidane, and the strategists each bowed. The new King, while still wet behind the ears when it came to military tactics, still held a firm grasp on the basics of the job. Standing up, he began his own speech, and asked the people present to give him their support.

“The armies of Lindblum and everywhere else should take care of Daguerro and Esto Gaza,” he began, “but we’re going to need a small reconnaissance force of our own to go to the Forbidden Continent. I’ve informed Eiko and my sister that there should be an arrival in the next few days, and if everybody works together, we can eliminate these threats while still keeping a large chunk of the army behind in case of another attack.

“The only problem is that we don’t have any volunteers yet,” he added glumly. Instantly, to nobody’s surprise, Beatrix and Steiner knelt before him.

“I shall do it, highness!” they both shouted. Zidane smiled at their loyalty.

“Thanks, that’s really sweet of you. But Rusty—I mean, Captain Steiner,” (the knight’s face beamed like the sun when he heard Zidane correct himself), “we’re going to need the Pluto Knights here, and you’re the only person capable of organizing them. Sorry, but your place is here.” Steiner paused to consider this, but eventually nodded his head.

“I understand, my liege. And who shall direct the Alexandrian troops?”

“We want General Beatrix to go out in your stead,” said Garnet gently. “And Lady Freya should go with her as well. Don’t worry, we have someone very capable filling in for the General’s position.”

“Whom?”

“General Aleila,” answered Zidane. Steiner turned his head, and let out a big smirk as he saw the graceful and beautiful General Aleila give off a salute.

“I thank thee, mine liege,” said the blonde warrior. “Tis’ an honor to fight alongside Sir Steiner, and to serve thee as well.” Steiner kept his smile for a little while longer before standing; Beatrix meanwhile was giving some last-minute instructions

to her subordinate, and Freya was quietly talking with the strategists.

“Are you sure we’ll be okay?” she had to wonder. “I don’t mean to override your authority, but Beatrix and I alone couldn’t possibly handle that many enemies.”

“You won’t,” answered Bosh. “You’ll have the assistance of Representative Carol, #266, Ms. Mikoto, and Mr. Ghiott. Their armies are small when compared to Alexandria’s, but combined, they are formidable.”

“That’s not what I meant,” muttered Freya. “I referred to our own individual force. Beatrix and I may be powerful, but do you think it would be better to send some others with us?”

“Yes, we’ve given it thought,” grumbled Bosh. “Queen Garnet has already assigned two others to be a part of your regime. Don’t worry, we wouldn’t even send the world’s greatest warrior in that conflagration by themselves.”

“Two others? Who do you have in mind?”

“I finished my job,” said Amarant blankly, giving the Queen an empty stare. Out of everybody in the known world, only a few could genuinely look at

authority and think nothing of it. Amarant was one of those few; he regarded Garnet as just another person, one who could bleed and make mistakes just like anyone else. His loyalty to Alexandria was exceptionally thin, and was reliable to a fault.

“That’s correct, you finished your job,” agreed Garnet. “And now I want you to do a new one, for me.” Amarant snorted, knowing exactly what the young woman had in mind. He crossed his arms and stared down at her emptily.

“You want me to go along with them, right?” She nodded her head yes. “Gonna cost ya.”

“Money’s no object,” she said. “I’m willing to part with as much as fifty-thousand Gil, in exchange for your services.”

“A hundred,” he said without missing a beat. Garnet glared at him, pursing her lips stubbornly.

“That was meant to be fifty-thousand for *each* of you.”

“Hm?” Showing genuine confusion, Amarant gazed down at the Queen and wondered who else she had in mind. As he saw her smile and wave for no apparent reason, he rolled his eyes and groaned as he realized who his partner was going to be.

“All right,” he grumbled, sensing The Hunter’s presence. “I guess if he’s coming along, then I can take a cut. But I’m not taking orders from that rat.”

“Fair enough,” replied Garnet softly. She turned around, beckoning an accountant to her side. The older man barely shuffled forward, a sack full of Gil weighing his poor arms down. He dropped it on the floor, sending a small vibration trembling across the ground.

“This is your payment—*after* you get the job done!” emphasized the Queen. She trusted Amarant a little, but knew better than to give someone like him all her money at once. She let him go with a ten percent down payment, and signed a document swearing that he would get the rest. From that point on, the Flaming one would be taking orders from Beatrix (and Beatrix alone, agreed the Queen), and would use any means necessary to ensure safety for the Forbidden Continent.

The Hunter made little comment about the arrangement, but assured both King and Queen that, with him along, success was absolutely guaranteed. Zidane never doubted him for a second.

“You have your orders,” said Zidane, trying to keep a straight face as he paced around in front of

the four fighters. “You are to dock at Madain Sari, where Representative Carol will rendezvous with you. You are then to liberate the summoner’s village, then will move on to the Black Mage Village and Conde Petie. The four of you should be able to take out a few small forces by yourselves, but please... don’t be afraid to accept assistance.”

Already sounding more like a King and less like a ruffian, Zidane proved to be a very good instructor. In the future, he might have made a terrific leader and even one of the best kings of all Alexandria, but for now he was still trying to fit into the baggy clothes of leadership. But Zidane was also a good actor—he could handle this.

And so could Beatrix and her company.

“Pardon me, son,” said The Hunter in his usual calm but thick northern accent. “Are you saying that we should take one city at a time? What do you think would happen to the other two?”

“I assure you that the individual armies will be able to hold their ground for a little while,” replied the young man. “But you’re right. We’re pressed for time here. Don’t put on any shows, understand? You are to work quickly and efficiently.”

“So it’s just another normal mission, eh?” said Beatrix, mounting her sword on her shoulder. Zidane could not help the smile that came forth.

“Yeah, for all of you. Well, you’ll know what to do once you get there! You guys are old enough to take care of yourselves!”

“Watch the ‘old’ bit, kid,” pointed the pepper-haired hunter. Zidane grinned and tried his best to wave off the comment.

“Sorry, sir. Anyway, best of luck to you all. Erin, Boyd, take care of them, okay?”

“Yes, sir!” piped the pilots.

“And Moguo?” he said, kneeling down to the level of the Moogle. “Make sure you tell us of every movement they make, all right?”

“Okay, kupo!” saluted the moogle. Moguo was the world’s fastest moogle, and that was no joke. He was so quick, he had been placed in charge of the Moogle Flute, a relic that summoned the fastest moogle in the world so they could record one’s journey. Moguo was the unofficial seventh part of the group, and with Erin and Boyd, he was to make sure that the other four had a safe (and sensible) journey.

King Zidane looked over everything one final time, whistled in exhaustion, and finally waved everyone away. He wished each one of them good luck, especially Amarant and Freya (poor guy had so many strange thoughts running through his head), and gave Beatrix the Moogles Flute before they all left.

“I trust you,” he whispered as he handed her the tool. She grinned, and kneeled in respect before departing aboard the *Red Rose*.

“Well,” sighed Freya as the vessel took off, “here we go again!”

“Go, go, go, go!”

Needing no further instruction from Erin, the small group of warriors leaped out of the airship and onto the ground of the Forbidden Continent. They had not even been there for a few seconds, and they could already see battles raging on. The Forbidden Continent had three major points of conflict: Conde Petie, Madain Sari, and the Black Mage Village. Since the small group obviously couldn’t be in all three places at once, they had to instead concentrate

all force on just one town at a time. Hopefully, the others could hold their ground for a little while...

Madain Sari, with its population of near-defenseless moogles, was the first to receive aid.

Beatrix, Freya, Amarant, and The Hunter dashed across the plains, the Iifa Tree standing like a sentinel to their backs, as they made their way to the city of summoners. Already, hundreds of monsters and other nasties were crowding around it, and Beatrix snarled to herself as she recognized some of them as the Golems that the Foe had introduced. Without wasting any time, the General and her small entourage broke past the initial blockade of monsters and set about liberating the town.

“About time you got here!!!” squealed a painfully-familiar voice. Eyes rolled as Eiko Carol leaped into the fray with them, a flute in her hands and a scowl on her face. “Jeez! What kept ya? We’ve been having to fight nonstop for almost two days now!”

“Sorry for the delay, Eiko,” said Freya as she held her spear in defensive position. “We just recently received the news. How have you been faring?” Leaping forward once to slash at a goblin, Freya returned to her spot to hear Eiko’s report.

“Terrible!” screamed the little summoner. “Most of the moogles were really hurt in the first day, and I spent almost all my energy summoning Eidolons! It’s been terrible out here!”

“I see...” A crowd of monsters suddenly surrounded the six of them, and weapons were drawn in preparation. ‘Sorry, but we’ll have to talk later!’ shouted Freya over the growling of the creatures. “Looks like we’ve got company!”

“Then let’s show’em a good time!” shouted the Hunter. He brought out two samurai-style katanas, and clanged them together threateningly. “I’m not much of a fighter, but I’ll do what I can!”

“We’ll help too!” shouted Erin, pushing aside several small creatures with her foot. “Boyd and I can help too!” Beatrix was about to order them to get back into the airship, but Amarant stopped her.

“Just let them do whatever they want,” he said impassively. “If they die, it’s their own fault.” Her mouth instantly fell open in a disbelieving gawk, and she almost gave him a berating if not for the interruption of a savage dingo. Freya was right: the time to talk was past. Besides, didn’t actions speak louder than words?

With formalities gone, the warriors each dove into the vicious fracas, slaying monsters around them so quickly that one would think a heavenly conductor was orchestrating (no pun intended) every attack. The four seasoned fighters alone proved to be adequate challenge for the beasts; having Eiko, Erin, and Boyd sprinkled in the mix didn't hurt their chances at all.

Amarant started by ripping apart a Scimotaur, a vicious monster that resembled both centaur and Minotaur. The beast was too easy; he next concentrated on one of the many Golems in the area. These were much larger and tougher, but against his maniacal attack, they were but dust. After shredding those two foes, Amarant decided to pick off every weak creature in the vicinity—in other words, everything.

He ran forth, slamming his palm into a ghost, and crushed the creature as he slapped his arm into a wall. Amarant then leaped over the arrows being fired by a few crack centaurs, and ran towards the halflings so fast that he was able to even dodge their volley. One swipe sent a centaur to his grave, and another, and another still, and Amarant leaped down to face his next unworthy foe.

“You’re rusty,” noted the Hunter blandly. “You’re not as quick as you used to be, and your strength’s down. Been drinking more, eh?”

“Shut up and kill things,” murmured the flaming one. The Hunter grinned, and decided to follow the younger man’s advice. With a speed unknown to most men his age—or to *any* man for that matter—the Hunter zoomed through the thick of the enemy conglomeration, swiping at anything that moved with his twin swords. They moved incredibly fast, as did he, and a trail of snowy blood was left in his wake.

“Easy!” declared the Hunter. Suddenly, he ducked down and just barely managed to avoid the attack of a brutal troll. Performing a backflip, he vaulted over the beast, rebounded off of a wall, and slammed both blades into the creature’s back before it knew what happened. The Hunter quickly unsheathed his swords from the troll’s flesh, and ran down the dead creature as it fell to the floor.

Instantly killing a goblin the second his feet touched the ground, the Hunter raced back into the thick of the fracas, and suddenly began to spin around like a deadly top. His swords extended in

front of him, the experienced old man twirled up a razor-sharp whirlwind of slashing pain.

Not one to be outdone by others, Freya was personally engaged with something that reminded her of the Kraken in Memoria. It was enormous, and it had eight powerful tentacles, most of them bearing weapons. A second monster, sort of like the Kary she had seen as well, had slithered towards her with a flaming tail and arms full of weapons. She smiled as the two lethal creatures ganged up on her, and held her spear close.

“I like these odds,” she said with a grin. The Kraken shouted, tossing its tentacles and its weapons at the dragoon with a mighty ferocity; the Kary let out a scream, hurling her own weapons at Freya as well. The dragoon merely rolled her eyes, and leaped high into the air just before being grazed by the weapons. She escaped death, but since both the Kraken and the Kary were now charging towards nothing, they did not.

She smiled coolly as her two foes collided with themselves, turned around once to slash at a crocodile that was creeping up on her, and ran towards the opponent she thought would be most

challenging. Disappointment rained down like the bats she had been swiping at.

In the meantime, Erin, Eiko, and Boyd were joining forces to tackle a dragon. It was roughly the size of a tree in height, and was no meaner than a volcano—hence its red color. Since the only two people of the group that even *passed* as a black mage were currently trying to rid the world of a Golem problem, it was up to them to strategize instead.

Erin plunged both her sais into the creature's belly, doing almost no damage at all. She yanked on them, hoping to tear a little flesh, but was promptly batted away by the dragon's arm. Boyd caught her, and there would have been a romantic moment if Eiko hadn't stepped in.

"Hey you two!" she screamed. "This is no time to get all lovey-dovey! We've got a job to do!" Growling in irritation, Eiko swung her flute at a bat and struck it square on the crown, and leaped in to help them with the dragon. It roared and nearly suffocated her with its vicious breath; she countered by ramming her flute right on its thick head.

"That's not gonna work!" shouted Boyd. "That creature's skin is too thick! What we need is—" His

voice was abruptly cut off in a flash, and before they could blink, the dragon was missing a head. Nobody was surprised in the least to see Beatrix with a bloody sword in her hands, kneeling down slightly as she smiled victoriously.

“Done!” she shouted—then turned around to whack at a screaming banshee behind her. Boyd, Erin, and Eiko all scratched their heads, sighed, and resolved themselves to fighting weaker enemies.

One very bloody hour passed.

Amarant yawned.

“Too easy,” he said slickly. Eiko, as always, screamed at him, but Freya and Beatrix were forced to agree.

“It was rather simple,” said Freya, her wounds being treated by a host of moogles. In fact, everybody was receiving care from the injuries they had gotten, and although the battle was surprisingly quick, there had still been enough damage inflicted to constitute for a brief breather. Time was one thing that nobody seemed to have much of—after all, the Black Mage village and Conde Petie were still in danger.

“Yes, well, we’re in the long haul here,” agreed Beatrix, her own wounds being attended to. “We might have had an easy time here, but that doesn’t mean we should let our guard down. After all, we still have two more cities to free.”

“Ow OW
OOOOOOWWWWWWWWW!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

“I wish somebody’d put her outta my misery,” grumbled Amarant. Even he had received a scratch here and there, but easily dismissed it as minor wounds. Eiko, on the other hand, screamed her pains away. The seven of them had just finished fighting through a whole assembly of wicked monsters, and a brief rest had to be taken. They would be done shortly, though, and soon they would be crying out Rally-Ho as they crashed through the gates of Conde Petie and freed the proud dwarves from their invaders.

It was going to be a long day.

“Whew, we’ve arrived!” whistled Erin, glancing from her map to the city in front of them. Brash as always, Beatrix and her company had dashed forward preemptively to fight the monsters invading the city, leaving Erin behind with Boyd “just in case”. The cute pilot couldn’t figure out why she

was on the sidelines—after all, she was better at fighting than most other aviators. Well, there had been that time with the dragon, but that was an exception!

“So, uh, Erin...” stuttered Boyd, “what say we sneak some quality time together!”

“Not now, Boyd!” hissed the pilot. “Can’t you see we’re in the middle of a war?” As if his skull was so thick that he did not, Boyd glanced up at Conde Petie, just barely hearing the sounds of intense fighting going on. Unlike Madain Sari, Conde Petie was filled to the brim with warriors and fighters. Dwarves were renowned for three great things: their great forging skills, their great fighting skills, and their great eating skills. And from the sound of the battle, at least two of the three were being used.

“Oh, right...” Boyd muttered to himself, scratched his head, and apologized. “Well, what else do you want me to do? We’re the only ones out here, unless you count Moguo...” At the mention of the moogle’s name, both pilots stole a glance at the creature, who only offered a wave and a “Kupo!”.

“Well,” replied Erin, “if you wanna do something, you can go get bandages and salve and

cures. I'm sure that everybody will be pretty wiped out by the time they're through fighting, so it'd be really great if we could have everything prepared for them when they come back!"

"Roger!" saluted Boyd, and he dashed off to the inner deck of the *Red Rose* to find some cures. Erin let out a sigh of boredom, bit her lip, and was forced to watch and listen as the battle raged on. Suddenly...

"Who you?"

"D'GAAAAAH!!!!!" Erin screamed and jumped in the air as the voice startled her, but composed herself in time to spin around and see who dared sneak up on her like that. She peered at the... creature... and for a moment thought she recognized who it was.

"...Quina?" she asked, staring at the bloated Qu. "...Quina, is that you?" The Qu shook its head several times, raising a steel ladle in the air several times.

"I not know Quina," said the Qu. "I Quban. I come here to see what makes all the noise!"

"Quban, huh?" Erin paused to take a good look at the Qu, which sort of looked like Quina and sort of

didn't. She was a pilot, so she had seen a lot of strange things in her day, but even she had a hard time discerning one Qu from another. This one, unlike Quina, was not dressed as a cook but a doctor.

"Yes-yes!" exclaimed Quban. "I come here, see what trouble is! Heard loud noise outside, went out to see! Noise disturbing, so I go look! Next thing I know, I see many-many monsters surrounding dwarf city! Is very scary, but since I doctor, I have no choice but look! Must heal those hurt, or else I bring shame to Qu clan!"

"I see," said Erin with a nod of her head. She smiled and introduced herself, and as soon as Boyd got back with the supplies, he introduced himself as well. Quban instantly dove into the supplies, arranging them in such an organized fashion that only another fellow physicist would ever truly appreciate it. Since he was more experienced with medicine than either one of them, he was instantly elected to be chief physician for when the good guys came back.

When General Beatrix opened her eye, what came first to her vision was a frantic Qu, shouting orders here and there and running everywhere else.

She groaned, and rubbed her face gingerly. *Strange, she thought, I don't feel nearly as bad as I should... and who's that Qu?.....Wait a minute!...It can't be!.....It is!*

“...Ughn... Dr. Quban?” grumbled the General. Quban smiled at the old friend, nodded its head, and applied a little more ointment to Beatrix's knee. It stung, but since she had felt a lot worse, she didn't even flinch.

“Yes-yes!” exclaimed the Qu. “Is Quban! I no see General Beatrix in very, very, VERY long time!!! Is good to see you!! Yes-yes!”

“Yes,” said Beatrix with a strained laugh. “It is nice to see you again. But what are you doing here, doctor?”

“Dr. Quban's work was being disturbed by the fighting in Conde Petie,” indicated Erin. “He got really ticked off, and had to go see what was happening, and because he's a doctor, he also had to go and help the dwarves.”

“Haaa, an' we didn'a even need yir help, ain't that right?!” cried a voice.

“Rally-Ho!!” came a cheer, and Beatrix could only assume that there were injured dwarves there

with them as well. Still tired from the battle, she let out an exhausted sigh, closed her eye, and let Quban and a few other physicians patch her and her friends up.

“So how do you know this Qu?” asked the voice of Freya. Not even bothering to raise her head, nor even to open her eye, Beatrix answered her friend.

“I met Quban while I was walking back to Alexandria from Burmecia,” she said. “I got into a little trouble on the way, and Dr. Quban here saved my life. S/he patched up my wounds, took care of me, and even fed me.”

“Wow,” said Freya. “I didn’t know there was a Qu doctor.”

“We not just gourmands!” insisted Quban, rubbing some alcohol on a scratch the Hunter had received. “We Qus good at many-many things! But we mostly cooks! Qus very, very good cooks!”

“Yes, I know,” said Freya with some amusement in her voice. “And you’re very good eaters, too!”

“OOOOOOOOOOOOOWWWWWWWWW!!
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” came a scream suddenly. “Watch it!!
OWIE!!! It hurts, it hurts, it
HUUUUUURRRRRRTSSSS!!!!!!!!!!” Eiko Carol let a

few other screams come out of her mouth as she wriggled, and most people either rolled their eyes, groaned, or tried to stifle laughter. This little rest would not last long—there was still one more place to liberate before the continent could be safe again, but thankfully, the entire populace consisted of strong Genomes and skilled black mages. If anything, the village had been saved already.

Well, almost.

“We have managed to whittle down their forces since their arrival,” reported Mikoto, “but if we didn’t receive your help when we did...”

“Yeah,” said the Hunter proudly, “you woulda been dead for sure.” The female Genome glanced up at the pseudo-humble man emptily, and a slight pause was held in the air as their eyes locked. The Hunter returned Mikoto’s stare second for second, and finally won the brief contest as she had other things to take care of. Brushing the old man off for the time being, Mikoto began shouting orders to her fellow Genomes, and #266 commanded his own troops on another front.

It was true that with the combined forces of the Genomes and the black mages, the village had received almost no trouble at all. Genomes were

quick, agile, flexible, and a few were exceptionally powerful; black mages possessed powerful skills that ranged from summoning fire to calling forth thunders. With such a team, it was little wonder that the third major battle to liberate the Forbidden Continent was a short one.

Still, Mikoto was right, to a degree. If the forces from Alexandria hadn't arrived so quickly, it would have taken a few more hours to free the town. As it were, the fighting ended within thirty minutes, and the town had been cleaned of invaders almost effortlessly. The Hunter *knew* what she was talking about, he just liked to rub things in from time to time.

"Anyway," said he, as Mikoto rallied the Genomes for the final attack, "I guess we only helped in speeding up the inevitable. You need anything else?"

"Yes, just a few more minutes of assistance," replied the female Genome. "Hopefully, we can completely liberate this town before suppertime. Mr. #18 makes a pretty delicious meat pie." She craned her head to glance at the older man, and flashed him a brief and rare smile before taking charge again. The Hunter grumbled out something and sighed.

“By God,” he muttered, “she’s acting more and more like that kid in Alexandria all the time...”

All in all, the fight to save the Forbidden Continent was a success. Three integral towns had been saved a terrible invasion, and many more would be saved as well. The crew aboard the *Red Rose*, which was even now flying back to Alexandria, didn’t have to worry about Daguerro or Esto Gaza. Those two cities were being taken care of by the naval and aerial powers of Treno, Lindblum, Dali, and even (to Freya’s breathless joy) a small handful of Burmecians. Beatrix had been smiling for at least an hour as she watched her friend weep for joy over discovering just how much of her kind were still alive in the world, and even now, as they headed for home, Freya had a peaceful and happy look on her face.

After liberating Conde Petie, Madain Sari, and the Black Mage village, Beatrix and her company stuck around for a few hours more to make absolute sure that everything was okay. Moguo’s skills were taxed to the extreme as he was sent from the allies overseas to Alexandria, but it was worth it. Garnet and Zidane needed to know what was going on, as did Beatrix’s team, so his services were invaluable. After all, the one who had planned these invasions

might've had his sights set on the kingdom, so it was crucial to keep in touch.

Now, though, it was time to rest and recuperate. Everyone was either asleep or chatting aboard the Red Rose: Beatrix and Freya were each resting in bed, and Eiko and Mikoto (who had volunteered to come along so they could visit their friends in the kingdom) were up chatting like two old friends. Quban was cooking up a light lunch; Amarant, as always, was off hiding somewhere, and the Hunter was equally invisible.

This came as no surprise—the team had learned of how incredible the Hunter's skills were, and after only a few hours into the battles, they had learned how he earned such a name. All five of his natural senses were unnaturally powerful, stronger than even nature allowed. He could smell things that a wolf never could, he could hear things a rabbit couldn't, he could see what eagles were unable to, and could feel what moles could not. He truly wasn't a fighter; he was more of a tracker, or as somebody put it so well, a Hunter.

So it was understandable why nobody could find him. He was just too good a hider. Rumor had it, the mysterious old man had once been the teacher of

Baku, as well as Amarant and a few other famous faces. It was little wonder Zidane idolized him so—the Hunter made even the greatest thieves seem ordinary, and could whip all of Tantalus with his arms tied behind his back.

So with their mission a success, the group of friends and fighters headed back to Alexandria. They had earned a vacation, and were sure to get one the very second they came home. However, as Commander Erin spotted a faint cloud of black smoke hover in the air, it was clear that fate had other plans...

“What’s that?” pointed Freya. Erin turned around and glanced at the horizon.

“What’s what?”

“That,” said Freya, pointing to a pillar of smoke in the distance. “What is that?”

“I dunno,” shrugged the pilot. “Probably just a fire that got out of control.” Freya pursed her mouth, rubbing her chin in deep contemplation as she gazed at the rising cloud of dark smoke. Suddenly, she asked for a pair of binoculars, and when she peered

through them, Freya let out a most sharp inhaling sound.

“I cannot believe it!” she hissed. “It’s Alexandria!”

“WHAT?! Here, lemme see those!!” Erin yanked the binoculars from Freya’s paws and glanced into the distance. Sure enough, a familiar castle with a symbolic sword protruding out of it was almost directly beneath the rising cloud of smoke. Erin cursed out loud as she realized that it was Alexandria, and unless Quina had screwed up royally, that smoke was probably caused by a fire.

“Fire!” shouted Erin. “Alexandria’s on fire!”

“Quiet!” snapped Freya, slapping her hands over Erin’s mouth. “Do you want to give everyone here a seizure? We can’t just scream ‘fire’!”

“But, what’re we gonna *do*?” squealed Erin in a frantic voice.

“Fly as fast as this thing can go!!” ordered the ex-Burmecian. “And prepare for a battle! My intuition tells me that our hunch about another invasion coming seems to have been correct!”

“But—”

“*Just fly, you dolt!!*” screamed Freya, and poor Erin needed no further instructions. Clenching her teeth in worry, Erin braced herself and pressed a big red button with the words “Super Boost — For Emergency Use ONLY” printed below it. As soon as her finger pressed down on the button, the *Red Rose* suddenly exploded forward in a burst of power and speed, sending nearly everyone tumbling backwards.

As soon as most of the crew had gotten used to the added speed, some of the more resilient ones crawled inside the cockpit and demanded to know whether Erin had gone insane or not. She insisted that the entire idea was Freya’s, who in turn told of the suspicious smoke coming from Alexandria’s direction. Erin’s actions were then justified and forgiven, but not before a few select people expressed their physical sickness over the sudden lurch.

Because of Freya’s “executive decision” and Erin’s excellent skills, the *Red Rose* arrived in Alexandria in world-record time. Sure enough, to the horror of every single crewmember and passenger, most of the castle and city was awash with flames. People were screaming, buildings were collapsing, and beneath all of the conflagration and chaos, the sounds of a vicious battle could be heard.

Almost everyone with a mouth let out a curse word as they realized that once again, Alexandria had suffered from an attack while most of its forces had been away. Luckily, “most of its forces” consisted of Freya, Beatrix, and the skeleton crew of the *Rose*, so things were actually better than they had been when the Foe invaded.

But it was still a horror to behold.

“I cannot believe it!” exclaimed Beatrix as she saw her home being turned into ash. “We have been tricked yet again! Alexandria is under attack!”

“Seems as if we were drawn away to lower the kingdom’s defenses,” muttered Freya darkly. A spear and a sword were brought out, and soon everyone that had ridden on the *Rose* emerged out, each of them with their own weapon. Sensing that now was a time for action and not words, Beatrix took command like the General she was and began issuing out orders.

“Erin! You and your crew see what you can do about those fires! Put them out as quickly as you can! Amarant! You and the Hunter should go fend off any invaders! Mikoto! You go and make sure that their majesties are safe! Eiko, Quban! You go attend to the wounded!”

“And what about you?” asked the Hunter. “What’ll you two be doing, eh?” Beatrix pursed her lips and tried to think how to best help her—no, *their* hometown. She would probably end up helping either Amarant or Eiko, or else tracking down the source of this blaze...

And then, suddenly, behind the vicious screaming and the crying and the maniacal laughing, Beatrix’s single eye flew open in boundless terror as she saw a ghastly-familiar person in the midst of the invasion. Medium height, dark-tan skin, red hair, black mustache and goatee, red clothes, a cruel laugh...

A tear fell down her face as the realization struck her.

Waaaaaaahhh! Waaaaah-haaaa-haaaaa!!
Mommy!! MOMMYYYY!!!!

Daddy! Daddy! Where are you, daddy!

AAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!!

Beatwix! Beatwix! Wheh ahh yoo?

Freyaaaaa!!!! Freyaaaa, helllllpp!!!!

G'haaaa-hahahahahahaaaaa!!!!

NOOOO!!!! DAAAAADDYYYYYY!!!!

It hurts!!! It's burning!!!!

HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!!

MOMMY, MOMMYYYYYYY!!!!

Beatwix, I'm scahed!

Freya... Freya... (sniffle) Waaaah-haaa-haaa...

“Hot enough for ya, kids?”

“Ah!” A second tear fell, and Beatrix’s pulse froze as she recognized who it was. The man that was in the middle of the flames, organizing everything, laughing, taunting, killing mindlessly...

“Kyahar Ignus...” Beatrix swallowed, and turned to face her childhood friend, who had just spoke. Freya looked more terrified at that moment than she had ever been, even during those dark days of depression and loneliness when she first came to Alexandria. Her furry face was scarred with tears as well, and she looked so sick and horrified that she barely even stood up.

Beatrix was ready to vomit from the horror of it all. That was Kyahar Ignus! That was the Fire General! That was the man who... who had... had...

Horror turned to rage. Grief turned to vengeance. Trauma turned to justice.

“Freya and I will handle *him*,” snarled Beatrix, pointing her sword at the man leading the invasion. “The rest of you go and do as you’re told. Hopefully we’ll be able to help before the whole place burns down.” The others nodded their heads and ran off to perform their individual jobs; Beatrix, in the meantime, walked over to her friend and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“Hey... are you going to be okay...?” No answer. Freya was catatonic, but it was a perfectly acceptable response. After all, one does not always get the chance to be in such close quarters to the one that had ruined their life.

“...Freya?” said a concerned Beatrix. “...Are you...?”

“Let us go,” said the dragoon emptily. She slowly snapped out of her trance, holding her spear firmly as ever. “Let us go, and end this suffering, once and for all. Not just for us, or for them, but for

everyone.” The General smiled at her friend, and couldn’t agree more.

“Yes. Let us go, and finish this long era of pain. Let us go, and avenge so many that have been lost already. After you, my dear friend.”

“Oh no,” insisted Freya with a smile, “after *you*, my dear friend.” Together, the two ladies grinned at each other, turned around, and stared into the fiery maw with weapons drawn, spirits high, and souls united. Together, Beatrix and Freya rushed right into the melee, screaming out to the one who had ruined their lives, screaming to the one that had separated such good friends, screaming out to such a vile murderer—screaming out, like angels.

Erin, Boyd, and their crew didn’t know the layout of Alexandria as good as they knew Lindblum, so finding water was a slight problem. The crew of the *Red Rose* had been a small one, so they had to fan out where they could to look for water. A few buckets were found and tossed, and handfuls of sand were thrown to douse smaller blazes. Boyd eventually found three hoses, and he and Erin and one other pilot grabbed them and each aimed their spray in a different direction. A few of the Pluto

Knights and Alexandrian soldiers watched their backs as they helped douse the fires.

There were far too many flames for even this small band, but the pilots did what they could. None were experienced enough to really fight in a battle, so this was really the only thing they could do. There was fire almost everywhere, and had it not been for the help of a certain eidolon spraying half the kingdom in a flood, the pilots would have been up to their necks in flames.

Amarant and the Hunter fared considerably better, though the Hunter's senses were dulled because of the heat and the smoke. They both plowed their way through the thick of the invading forces, and quickly found themselves aiding Steiner and his own soldiers. The armored man demanded that they both tell him what was going on, and in their usual cool tone, they did.

“You!!! What treachery is this!! What is going on here?!?!”

“An invasion,” said the Hunter casually. Steiner's face grew red with anger, and the knight leaped up and down a few times to emphasize his rage.

“Grrr, you...!”

“Settle down now, Tin Man,” said the Hunter calmly. “I think it’d be best if we fought with our hands and not with our mouths.”

“Grrr, why you—”

“Unless you wanna sit and watch *us* defend the kingdom?” said the Hunter with a smirk. Steiner’s anger increased a few dozen levels, but thankfully the knight focused all his rage on the invaders and not on either one of the mercenaries. With that said, the three warriors stood back to back, fighting off everything that wasn’t a friend, and with their combined skills, they slowly pushed the enemies away.

Mikoto, on the other hand, was leaping through the fray in search of her “brother” and new “sister-in-law”. The Genome and his wife were exceptionally easy to spot in the thick of the fight: they were both surrounded by Alexandria’s best knights, including the muscular but gentle Aleila (who had been Beatrix’s stand-in while the General was away).

Zidane himself was guarding Garnet with his very life, and often had to step forward to slay a few monsters himself. It seemed all of Alexandria existed solely to guard the Queen, but if one knew

her personality well enough, they would understand why this was so. When the female Genome finally joined her “family”, Zidane gave her a hug despite the fact that they were all in the middle of a war.

“Hey Mikoto! Long time no see, sis! What’s been happening?”

“Zidane!”

“Highness!”

“Hey!”

“Sorry,” murmured the King, apologizing to wife, sister, and guardians. “I guess I got carried away. Sorry...” Mikoto shook her head, suddenly turned around to give an oncoming human fighter a mighty shove, and turned back to give her brother a weak smile.

“We can have our reunion later,” she said. “Right now I have to protect my big brother and his wife. What kind of an example would I be setting to any future nieces or nephews?” Garnet blushed at Mikoto’s reference to children, but all social calls were put on hold as more invaders stormed forward. Mikoto stood in front of her family, and together the three of them fended off the onslaught of soldiers and fire.

With everyone else helping in their own particular way, Quban and Eiko were left to take care of the wounded. The larger and stronger of the two helped carry any wounded soldiers away from the fight, and laid them all in a neat row for Eiko to cure. The little summoner knew that she had to reserve her magic, so she only hit the victims with low-level Cure spells. Thankfully, Quban had a large supply of Hi-Potion, Ether, Elixir, Antidote, Remedy, and even Phoenix Down to help in the effort.

The Qu was busy retrieving the wounded, which left Eiko busy curing them all. A few were healthy enough to only require a potion, and then if they felt up to it, they would be placed back inside the fracas. To Eiko's surprise, hardly any of the soldiers chose to stay out of the fight, and those that did were usually critically injured or missing a limb. Everyone else had an unquenchable desire to protect their homeland from such a threat, and the outstanding honor they showed made Eiko think.

"Amazing," she whispered, watching a small group of soldiers limp back into battle. "I've never seen such dedication before... They must really love this place!"

“Home where heart is!” stated Quban. “Qu Marshes like parts of body to me! If I no protect, they become lost, and I never see again. I have no home then. Marshes belong to me, just like castle belong to soldiers. They fight for what theirs.” Eiko smiled at the Qu’s deep yet simple wisdom, and agreed with all her heart.

“Hey, yeah, you’re right! Wow, so the soldiers are fighting for what is theirs, just as everyone else is, too! And, and, Zidane and Garnet are fighting as well! But, but, most of these people have never even set foot in this kingdom!”

“Not important,” said Quban. “Friendship also good reason to fight. I not know you, but I fight for your home if you ask! You do the same, yes?”

“...Well, sure!” exclaimed Eiko after a moment’s thought. “I mean, I know Quina, so yeah, I guess I’d fight if s/he asked me to...” Quban smiled at the summoner, then burped out an apology as more soldiers fell wounded. S/he rushed back into the melee to retrieve them, leaving Eiko to think some more.

The summoner took note that most of the soldiers she had cured were people she had seen in that makeshift clinic many times before.

(Author's note: Just to let you know, if this were part of the game, the music that would be playing at this point would be the same when Beatrix and Steiner were defending Alexandria from the Mist Monsters early in Disc 3. For those who have it on MP3, MIDI, or CD, feel free to crank it in!)

“IGNUS!!!!!!!!!!”

The shrieking sound of two warriors pierced the chaotic skies, and the man behind this invasion, the “Fire General” Kyahar Ignus, turned away from his slaughtering and wondered who had called his name. Standing there, in the midst of the flames like angels, were two warriors with deadly, legendary weapons drawn. Each one of them had a look of pure anger and rage and justice in their eyes, and both of them looked set to kill the fiery man. He swallowed, snarled at them once, and laughed.

“And just who are you?” he said in a scratchy voice. Both Beatrix and Freya took a single step forward, the Dragon’s Hair spear and Save the Queen shining brightly in the burning air.

“Trust us, you’d rather not know,” snarled the human. “Let’s just say that we were spawned from a nightmare.”

“Your only concern is dying at our merciless hands,” said the Burmecian coldly. Beatrix agreed.

“You have no chance against us. Flee, and you will die. Stay, and you will die. Fight us, and you shall surely die.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about!!” shouted Ignus over the chaos. “I don’t know what you two are after!!”

“D’negel!!!” screamed Beatrix. “Do you remember a town named D’negel?!”

“What??”

“Twenty-three years ago, you destroyed a small town called D’negel,” explained Freya. “You burned it to the ground, but you never thought that there would be survivors!”

“Survivors?” parroted the flaming man. “What do you mean?” The two women looked at each other, nodded their heads, and stared down the Fire General.

“There were two girls you let live while you were on your campaign,” said Beatrix. “One was a human with brown hair and red eyes, and the other was a Burmecian with silvery hair and green eyes. We are

those children, Ignus!” The Fire General stared hard at the women, trying to recollect something from so long ago. Suddenly, as the screams and the flames reached a crescendo, his eyes bulged out in terror as he remembered.

“Ach! I, I remember you now! I left you to live in that worthless town! I thought you both would have been killed!”

“A mistake that you shall pay for with your life!” cried Freya as she prepared to strike with her spear. “Sparing us was the worst thing you could have done, Ignus! We are no longer helpless children! We are two warriors, two souls united under pain and torment and loss, two strangers who should have been friends for all their lives, but such a bond was cruelly cut by you!!!”

“And now, we seek to avenge ourselves, along with so many others!!” shouted Beatrix. By this time, Ignus’ dark face had turned white, and was awash with perspiration. He quivered with fear, and took several slow steps backwards, as if the distance would really save him from the combined wrath of the warriors. As he turned to run, Freya leaped up onto a building, and threw her spear so that it landed just in front of the retreating General. With another

leap, she crashed down to the ground, grabbed her spear, and blocked off the cowardly man's only escape.

He was trapped.

"Ahhh!!!!" he screamed. Freya and Beatrix slowly closed the gap, forcing him into a smaller and smaller pincer lock with each approaching step. "Aaaah, noo!!! Stop!!"

"Stop?" blurted Beatrix. "Why should we stop? You ruined our lives, Ignus! You destroyed everything we had known! There is no excuse for such cruelty! We shall never forgive you for what you have done!"

"But—"

"Enough!!!" Together, the two warriors closed the gap, and to the horror of Ignus, brought their weapons up for one final, great, mighty blow. Together, the two long-lost friends from a village long since forgotten banded together, and cried out to the heavens as they prepared to end all the suffering.

"I am General Beatrix Francine de Alexandria!"

"I am Dragoon Freya Aphrodite Crescent!"

“We are the guardians of Alexandria and Burmecia!”

“We are the warriors of justice!”

“We are fighters, we are warriors, we are mighty!”

“We are comrades, we are friends, we are family!”

“We were separated by fate, and then were brought together by fate!”

“We are indomitable, and we are invincible!”

“But most importantly, Ignus...” And simultaneously, they cried out:

“We are together!!!” The two glared hotly at the General, and with a sudden thrust, they both drove their weapons straight through his body: Freya rammed her spear in his back, and Beatrix thrust her sword in his stomach. Ignus choked and lurched slightly as the combined blows impaled his body, and slowly, his life left him. Together, Beatrix and Freya yanked their weapons out of his lifeless body, sending him tumbling to the floor in a very dead heap.

The both turned around, knelt to the ground, and clasped their weapons in front of them in a prayer of victory. They each let out a weary breath, and slowly it dawned on them that they had done it. They had avenged their past, and their loved ones, and they had avenged a life that never got a chance to start, and a friendship that was never given the chance to flourish until now.

“...Mother...” whispered Beatrix, “I’ve done it.”

“Father...” said Freya, “it is over.”

“Brother... sister...”

“Aunt... uncle...”

“Friend... cousin...”

“Men... women... children...”

“Everyone...” And together, simultaneously, they whispered out one final sentiment:

“You may rest in peace now. You have been avenged.”

It was over. At long last, it was really and truly... finished.

With the help of Commander Erin and her crew, and with the assistance of a certain frosty eidolon, the flames that had ran rampant in Alexandria slowly died away until there was nothing left of them except dark spots on the ground, and ash. A weak victory cheer erupted out of the town as the few remaining enemies beat a hasty retreat, and soldiers everywhere gave off weak smiles as the invasion prevention became successful.

Garnet and Zidane, having been protected by a circle of loyal soldiers, quickly gave orders to a few of their protectors that they should give chase to the retreating enemy. Clerics, doctors, and healers were then called to attend to the wounded, and soon the royal couple themselves were scouring through the town, making sure that their friends were all right.

For the most part, Alexandria had gotten out of that skirmish with little more than a few scrapes and bruises. Since almost all of the armed forces had been left behind to protect the kingdom, they were about as prepared as one could be for a surprise invasion. The addition of the small but helpful band of warriors and pilots that arrived late in the siege had definitely turned the tide in the war, and the defeat of Ignus was crucial. There were very few

deaths on Alexandria's part—mostly destroyed property, which could easily be rebuilt.

But with a successful defense came a multitude of questions. Why was Alexandria targeted? Why had Ignus invaded? Was he connected to the Foe, another mighty enemy that had laid siege to the kingdom? Or did he work on his own? Or even still, did he work for another person? Would there be another invasion in the near future? If so, would this new threat use the same tactics as the previous two, or would there be a surprise in store? What was the main reason for all this destruction? Why.....

“Why...?”

“Our job's over,” sniffed Amarant, giving off another one of his lazy salutes. Both he and the Hunter were slowly walking towards the main gate of Alexandria, and from the looks of it, neither one of them wanted to stay around for very long. Zidane had wanted to know why they were leaving so abruptly, and as always, with abrupt actions came abrupt answers.

“Well, yeah, it is,” said the new King, “but... at least stick around to help us!”

“Sorry, son,” shrugged the Hunter. “We have other business to attend to. Gotta make a living, y’know?”

“And what sort of business is this?” asked Zidane. A pause.

“Bounty hunting.” Another pause. “Rumor has it that there’s a very handsome reward going out to anybody that can bring in this girl, alive. It’s a new bounty, so I haven’t heard about it very much. All I know is that the girl’s a threat to one of the most well-known families in all of Gaia. Of course, I wouldn’t know why one single girl could ever be a threat to anyone, but...” The old mercenary shrugged, spat something out, and saluted lazily to the king.

“Anyway, the faster we go out there and claim this bounty, the faster we can scare up some cash. It’s not easy living honestly, you know.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” mumbled an empathetic Zidane. “But, hey, what do you mean by ‘we’?”

“He means that he’ll be going with someone else,” muttered Amarant. Zidane gave the taller man a look and sneered a little.

“I *knew* that. I meant—”

“Namely me,” pointed Amarant to himself, and Zidane froze in surprise. The last time he could recall, Amarant was never one for working with other people. There had been exceptions, like Lani and Zidane’s crew, but for the most part, the flaming one was a loner.

“But... I thought you only worked alone!”

“Normally, yes,” nodded Amarant. “But this time, I’m willing to make an exception. Seeya round’, kid.” And with a final weak salute, Amarant left Alexandria castle just as silently as he came, leaving Zidane to scratch his head. The Hunter sensed the young King’s confusion, cleared his throat, and offered an explanation.

“He’s coming with me because I’m the best,” he said. “You know, I used to be Salamander’s teacher. I taught him everything he knows, but thankfully, I didn’t teach him everything *I* know. That’s just not something ya do to your student.”

“Whoa!” blurted Zidane. “You mean to tell me that *you* were the guy who instructed Amarant?!”

“And your old boss Baku,” pointed the Hunter coolly. Leaving Zidane to stand there gaping, the old man said a silent farewell, donned his green cloak,

and quietly went off in search of another prey. With the combined skills of the Hunter and Amarant, there would be no creature alive that could escape them. This girl, whoever it was, did not stand a chance at all. Personally, Zidane felt sorry for whoever it was.

But in the meantime, the kingdom had a lot of puzzles to solve.

Slowly making her way through the smoking rubble, Queen Garnet discovered Beatrix and Freya still quietly kneeling, both of them on either side of the now-dead Fire General. The cruel tyrant had two massive holes in his body, from the combined attacks of the two warriors. He had been slain by both at the exact same time, and with the thrust of a spear and a sword, so many people and places and memories and possibilities were avenged that not even Dr. Tot could have tallied them all.

“Hey! Are you two okay?” she asked as she ran towards them. Both knights slowly stood up, their weapons faintly dripping of blood. They both turned to their Queen and friend, and gave solemn salutes.

“We are in perfect condition, highness,” said Freya. “We could not be more joyful if we wanted to. This... really has been a wonderful day for both

of us.” Garnet smiled at the former Burmecian, and expressed her own relief as well. With a sigh, she gazed at the two long-lost friends, and let her facial expression do most of the talking.

“What has happened?” she asked rhetorically. “Why did this invasion have to occur? Was this man, this... Fire General behind it, or was there another still? Do you think he was connected to the Foe? And why are they drawing our forces away with attacks in other regions of the world? Is there some method to this madness, or are we all just witness to a long streak of bad luck?” A pause.

Neither warrior knew just what to tell the young Queen. In fact, nobody could have had such answers, at least not yet. Investigations could be made, and inquiries could be drawn up, but the fact of the matter was that there were too many questions, and not enough answers. It was both a wonderful victory, and a shallow one, for they that win must always be vigilant.

Eventually, Steiner and the rest of the crew joined the Queen, each one giving their own reports. Steiner himself gladly boasted of how almost all the enemies had been defeated, while Mikoto and Zidane backed up his claims. Quban and Quina

(who didn't know each other) each gave statistics on the injured, as did Eiko, and Erin and her crew explained how (with the help of the Vivis) almost all of the fires were gone now.

In a sense, Alexandria was like the inner workings of a clock, and the gears had been rotating smoothly for awhile now. This invasion was a terrifying yet brief intermission, and with repairs underway, the wheels were rolling once again, albeit slowly. The only real damage done was property destruction: in other words, unlike the previous invasion, Alexandria had been prepared. Of course, Beatrix and Freya also deserved a little credit for snuffing out the leader of the siege, so everybody had done well and Success was the ideal.

But to balance out all this good news, there came worry and doubt, and fear. Queen Garnet had lots of questions, and everyone else who had fought and bled were in the dark as well. It would take a great number of minds to solve most of these problems, and it would take quite a large assortment of individuals to approach each problem with ingenuity and reason. It would take men of honor, and women of deliberation; it required demi-humans of wisdom, nonhumans of intelligence, and a single tie that bound them all together.

In other words, it would take the Council of Gaia, and so, another meeting was called...

“Announcing the arrival of King Zidane and Queen Garnet of Alexandria, accompanied by Lady Beatrix and Lord Steiner!”

“Announcing the arrival of Mayor Huffle of Dali, accompanied by Secretary Holmes!”

“Announcing the arrival of Cid and Hilda Falbool of Lindblum, accompanied by Minister Artania!”

“Announcing the arrival of Quale from the Qu Marshes, accompanied by Qucla and Qudara!”

“Announcing the arrival of Queen Stella from Treno, accompanied by her servant Mei and King of the auction house!”

“Announcing the arrival of Chief Ghiot of Conde Petie, accompanied by Gregory Farseer and Mabel Gatewatcher!”

“Announcing the arrival of Mr. #266 and Person of Chairs Mikoto, accompanied by #44, #8, Giovanni, and Tatyana!”

“Announcing the arrival of representative Eiko Carol of Madain Sari, accompanied by Morrison and Momatose!”

“Announcing the arrival of Bishop Benedic of Esto Gaza, accompanied by Cardinals Gregory and Pius!”

“Announcing the arrival of Grand Elder Vanderhaum of Daguerro, accompanied by Elder Marshal and Elder Stevens!”

“Announcing the arrival of Prince Puck of the Burmecian refugees, accompanied by Lady Freya Crescent and Lord Sleipnir Waggin!”

It was time. The Council of Gaia had gathered once again.

Very little had changed since the last time the Council of Gaia got together. With the exception of those accompanying their representatives, the only real change was the ambassador of Burmecia and Cleyra. Since both civilizations had been virtually wiped off the face of Gaia, only a few small pockets of survivors still clung tightly to existence. Most of that number had integrated themselves into other cities, in order to mingle with other peoples and spread their numbers out, but one might be surprised

to learn how many secret Burmecian bases there had been. Freya's relief at seeing Prince Puck alive (not to mention Vivi's) made all of her previous troubles seem trite.

Of course, the other big change in the Council was in the Alexandrian corner, where a new King sat smiling at his fellow representatives. Most of the leaders of the world smiled back at the King, and only a select few paid him little attention. It wasn't that he was unlikable—there were just more important matters at hand than socializing.

“Let us begin this meeting, shall we?” asked Regent Cid, and he pounded his gavel down on the desk to quiet the group. A brief glance around the circular table told him that everyone was ready to discuss business. “Right!!”

“Now,” he began, “this entire meeting was called by King Zidane and Queen Garnet, and I think we all know what it is about. Now in the past, we have gathered together to merely give statistics concerning the Mist, and to assure everyone else present that the world is slowly recovering. Today, though, I am afraid that this council shall have to go to war, or to at least a powerful vigil. Your

highnesses, you have the floor first.” Zidane and Garnet both gave Cid a smile, and rose to their feet.

“Fellow leaders of the world,” began Garnet, “we are pressed for time, so I will make this as brief as possible. Alexandria has suffered two powerful attacks within the past year or so, and although we have succeeded in defending our kingdom so far, I fear that there shall be a third, and hopefully final, invasion before we see the end of this. But I fear this last one more than the first, for my intuition tells me that it will be the worst of them all.”

“And do you have any proof of this?” asked Vanderhaum of Daguerro.

“No, nothing, except my gut feeling,” replied Garnet. “But I am one to usually follow my instincts, so forgive us if Alexandria becomes a little more suspicious than what you are used to.”

“There were other cities attacked as well,” emphasized Zidane. “Nearly everywhere on the Forbidden Continent suffered from an attack, and Daguerro and Esto Gaza too. These enemies seemed to have the intention of pulling our forces away from us, and striking us while our defenses were down. We’ve thankfully gotten out of these jams, but I gotta agree with my wife on this one. I smell another

siege.” The leaders murmured amongst themselves, and one stood up to express his opinion.

“We at Esto Gaza thank Lindblum, Treno, and Dali for their help,” said Bishop Benedic. “Without their assistance, I fear that our entire culture would have been buried in the snow. I, for one, express the views of all my people when I say that we would be glad to repay such a favor.”

“As would we,” said Vanderhaum. “But the important question is, *will there* be another attack?”

“I would anticipate one,” replied Garnet, “but I can’t be certain. Of course, if any of us *were* certain, then there would be no point in talking. We would have already went out and stopped our unknown foe before anything could happen.” The old representative of Daguerro hummed to himself, stroked his beard, and sat back down again.

“Tell me, what sort of questions might you have?” asked Hilda. Both Zidane and Garnet gave out tired sighs.

“Maybe a little more than you’d care to know,” he said. “First of all, we were wondering if the guy that invaded recently—”

“Ignus.”

“Right, Ignus. Anyway, we were wondering if he had any connections: to the Foe, to anyone else, or if he was just working on his own. We’d also like to know why our kingdom, of all places, is being attacked. No offense, but I’m curious to know if any of your cities are being targeted.”

“The lad brings up a sound concern,” agreed Ghiot of Conde Petie. “His kingdom ain’t th’ only one that’s in danger! Ah’m sure that our own village’ll be attacked, an’ soon! Ah mean, we was one’uh the cities that got attacked th’ last time!”

“And so was ours,” said #266 of the Black Mage Village. “In fact, most every city outside of the Mist continent was targeted. But as Person of Chairs Mikoto told me, the efforts to crush our own homes were halfhearted at best. There was just no effort behind any of the attacks.”

“Says you!!” shouted Eiko suddenly. “Madain Sari was almost totally wiped out!!”

“Maybe because you and moogles only ones there!” suggested Quale.

“WHY YOU—”

“Is true!” insisted the Qu. “You not have many soldiers. You go down easily. I know you are good

summoner, but you are one, and they are many.” Eiko’s face tightened with rage, but she thankfully used common sense to hear Quale out. He was right: Madain Sari was too poorly-defended, and would have collapsed first had it not been for the intervention of the crew of the *Red Rose*.

“Anyway,” coughed Cid, trying to change the subject, “I suppose that we should all keep an extra eye on Alexandria, as well as on each other. If everyone assists everyone else, then in turn everyone will *be* assisted by everyone else, so if we all keep our eyes on each other, then there’s no way we can lose.”

“But what if there really *is* another enemy out there?” asked Huffle of Dali. “I live very close to Alexandria, so my people might be hit as well! That’s two members of this house, struck by the same invader!”

“Dali didn’t appear to be a target the last two times,” noted Garnet. “Thankfully, your town was ignored during the last two sieges.”

“Yes, but there’s always a next time.” Silence. Cid Falbool stroked his mustache out of bad habit, and began to think of how he could help his “niece”. Her concerns were justified: not only was

Alexandria in danger, but every other city in the world as well. It certainly didn't seem that way at first, but he also had to remember that the enemy's schemes got nastier and nastier at every siege.

The first real threat, after the defeat of Kuja and Necros, had been aimed at Mognet Central, an irreplaceable part of communications. Next, every city outside the Mist continent had been hit, forcing the armies of the world to spread their numbers. This next attack, if there would be one, might have been the worst out of them all. Only the Creator of that world knew for certain, and until the time came, Gaia would just have to wait.

"Well," spoke Puck suddenly, "let's say that there *was* an attack. What would we, as a united world, do then?"

"...Probably help out, I guess," shrugged #266. "I mean, if we're all watching out for each other, we can't just sit by and watch everyone crumble, right?"

"The pinty-hat's right!" cheered Ghiot. "This ain't no time fer stoopid squabblin' or vicious greed! Any diff'rences we might've had have to go away before any real peace can be achieved! We've gotta look out fer one another, no matter how small er big we are! Ah'd give mah strength to protect Dali, just

as much as ah would to protect Lindblum, and you all should too!!!” A chorus of agreeing voices rose up in the air, and soon everyone there agreed to pledge loyalty and service to any country in need, regardless of importance or size. There was even a treaty signed.

And so, the cogs of war turned once again. The only thing Zidane and Garnet could do was watch, and keep their eyes and ears open. They had to be prepared, for as the old maxim went: “Vigilance is the price of freedom”. Alexandria’s defenses would be bolstered, and Freya would be vastly occupied with training her soldiers for any future invasions. It was going to be a tense time, where trust would be precious and friends even more precious, and sacrifices would have to be made before any sort of peace could be achieved.

The Council of Gaia continued long into the night, and dispersed the next afternoon. Most everyone walked away from that meeting with confidence and assurance, and many felt as if Garnet and Zidane were worrying over nothing, and that the worst was behind them all. Yet still, even with things as calm as they were now, neither Freya nor Beatrix could deny the fact that they had a bad feeling about all this.

To be continued...

8. Balance

Part Eight: Balance

It was a terrible funeral. There were dead people everywhere. Not even the priest knew just how many people had died in the massacre. The number of survivors was almost nonexistent: with the exception of those who had been away at the time, there was only a small handful of people who had lived through the terror, and most of these people had terrible injuries covering their bodies. Only two individuals had been completely spared the flames, and they were huddled together next to four of the caskets, comforting each other despite the pain. One was a human, and the other was a Burmecian.

The little mousy girl was one of the few Burmecians who were not native to the rainy city. She had been born in that very village, and grew up with a close cadre of friends—partially human, partially those that were her species. The children had been so small and innocent that they were unaware of any real differences with each other, except that the Burmecians looked different and had an accent.

They had been so small and innocent... so small, so young, so naïve... And now, their friends were dead, their ashes feeding the hungry earth. Their parents had been killed in the destruction as well—in fact, these two little children were really the only ones left of their former life. Their parents, their friends, their relatives... everyone they had ever known and loved was either burned to death, or else scorched beyond help. They were the only ones left—the only ones pure.

“I’m scahed, Beatwix,” whimpered the Burmecian, her voice still not used to pronouncing the letter “R”. Her friend, the human, hugged the younger child close in an effort to comfort her.

“I’m scared too, Freya. I’m very very scared.” The Burmecian girl sniffled, the tears flowing freely from her emerald eyes.

“Is mama and papa comin’ back?”

“I don’t know,” answered her human friend. “Maybe. Maybe.”

“I hope so,” pouted the Burmecian as she held her friend. “I miss them vewy much.”

“I miss my mommy and daddy too,” added the human. The two little girls continued to hold and

comfort each other, their tears falling freely down their faces as they huddled beneath the caskets. The two on the left held the human's parents, and the two on the right were the Burmecian's, but there were so many other caskets there that it was difficult to tell who was who.

There were only a few mourners, and most of these people were survivors of the catastrophe. There were a small amount of others there, mostly friends of the dead or friends of survivors, but there was nobody there to comfort the two girls. These two, Beatrix and Freya, were there all alone, with only each other to ease their pain. It was a terrible and lonely time for them, and very scary and confusing.

A few minutes passed, and the mourners slowly left to go about their lives. Nobody came to get the two crying girls, though several people gave them forlorn glances as they passed. A few nice people asked them where their parents were, and got grievous replies as the girls pointed to the caskets. There was nobody there for them—they were orphans, the both of them, and the only thing they had left was each other.

But as fate would have it, two individuals had also attended that funeral. One of them was the brother of one of the dead Burmecians, a well-respected and skilled Dragoon named Fisher Crescent; the other was a charitable old man who held compassion for young people, especially if they were orphans. He was quite famous in those regions, and his name was Phineas Bailey Shekkel. Both men approached the girls at the same time, and knelt down to talk with them.

“Hey, pretty lady... Look up here, darlin’.” The Burmecian looked up, sniffled, and almost forgot about her troubles as she recognized the face.

“Unka Fishy!” Fisher laughed out loud as he scooped Freya into his arms, and the girl kissed his fuzzy cheek until her tears were dried again.

“Howdy there, ma’am,” he smiled, tipping his hat. Freya let out a giggle and rubbed her nose against his. Beatrix slowly stood up, and walked over to pull on the older man’s knickers.

“Scuse’ me, mister... Are you Freya’s uncle?”

“I am, lil’ lady,” said Fisher, ruffling the girl’s long brown hair. His smile grew serious after a second, and the mood of the funeral finally calmed

him down. *“Lissen, Freya, your ma ‘n pa ain’t comin’ back no more, an’ since your pa was my kin, ah guess that makes me yer legal guardian until yer old n’uff to go out’n live on yer own. Ya understand me?”*

“Yes, Unka Fishy,” said Freya. “You shue mama and papa not comin’ back?”

“No dear, they’re gone for good.” Freya whimpered and slumped her shoulders in childish sadness. Tears began to flow out from her eyes again, but Fisher held her close until her eyes were dry again.

“It’s okay, darlin’,” he assured her. “It’ll be okay. These things jus’ happen. Death’s as indiscriminate as the wind, baby cakes. It’s all right to be sad, but’cha need to dry yer tears someday! Okay?” He chucked Freya’s chin and smiled at the girl, and she sniffled and tried her best to smile. Fisher grinned as the little girl smiled, and hoisted her up on his shoulders.

“Phinny,” he said, saluting to the older man, “you think you can handle that lil’n?”

“I’m sure I’ll be able to take another one in,” said the old man. He smiled and reached for Beatrix,

who shied away from the older man. In a heart-wrenching scene, the little girl reached for Freya, whose own hand was grasping for Beatrix. Phineas and Fisher both sighed sadly, and let the girls embrace for one last time.

“Freya, honey, yer gonna have to say farewell to yer friend,” said her uncle after awhile. “She ain’t got no more family now, but at least you have me’n yer auntie. Honey, it’s best that she go with Mr. Shekkel now. Ah can’t take care’a her—shucks, ah’ll be stretchin’ the budget as it is with you now, and besides, she’ll prob’ly be happier with other humans. Ah’m takin’ you back to my city, where there ain’t another human bein’ fer miles around, an’ ah know that the two’a you is close, but honey...”

“Don’t wanna leave Beatwix,” whimpered Freya, hugging her friend protectively. Fisher sighed, and knelt down to kiss his niece’s shoulder.

“Honey, ah know you don’t wanna leave her. Shoot, ah had to leave mah own brother so ah could live with yer auntie! Didja think ah wanted to do that?” A pause.

“No.”

“But ah did anyway. An’ it’s not like ah never really saw him again—well, uh, you know...” Fisher sighed, shook his head, and gently pulled his sobbing niece away from Beatrix.

“It’s for the best,” assured the old man, holding Beatrix’s shoulders gently. “I can give you a good life. I can’t guarantee that you’ll always be happy, but I will promise to love you as if you were my own. Okay?” Beatrix sniffled, and turned around to slowly nod her head. With a smile, Phineas hefted the little girl up on his shoulders, and Fisher lifted Freya up, and the two males nodded at each other before leaving. As they turned their backs to leave, both Beatrix and Freya waved goodbye to each other.

“Bye-bye, Beatwix,” said Freya. “I wuv you!”

“Bye, Freya... I love you too...”

The two friends would not see each other for twenty-two years.

Every year, the Annual Burmecian Festival of the Sun would take place. It was the one day of the year when no rain fell upon the city, and every citizen was expected to attend with their finest celebratory outfits and the most lavish costumes. Everyone,

regardless of age or occupation, was expected to participate in the Great Burmecian Dance, and decorations would be strewn around the city for all the world to see. Freya had been to eight of them already, and looked forward to the day like it was the most wonderful holiday in the world.

Her Uncle Fisher had always been her dancing partner when it came time for the festivities' acme, but now Freya was old enough to find a nice young man to be her partner. She had turned twelve some time ago, so it was that time in her life where her interest would be fixed on the opposite gender. Freya was usually shy around young boys, but during the Festival, it was perfectly okay for one to let loose and socialize with everyone within visual distance.

Along with the small assortment of lady-friends she had acquired since first arriving, Freya had worn the traditional Sandstorm Dancer costume, an ensemble that was a little similar to what the real Dancers used in Cleyra. She had been living in Burmecia now for about nine years, and slowly over that time, she had forgotten about her home, and about the man that had destroyed everything, and the brown-haired girl that was taken away from it all. The only memories she really had were just stories told to her by her uncle, and a few faint

dreams. Perhaps it was for the best—that life had nothing for her except pain.

With her assortment of friends, Freya scurried off to the festival, placing all her chores and duties behind her. She was young, and it was a very special day, so of course she could leave her work behind. It was not every day that the rain in Burmecia cleared, so one had to get out and enjoy it!

They could already hear the lively music playing, and the ground shook just a bit from the stamping of feet and the clapping of hands. Freya's friends had already scouted out their dates by the time they got to the festival, and the girls split up to be with their individual "love". Freya was not one to be left behind, oh no, and ran just as quickly into the thick of the celebration to search for a dance partner. Her pursuits led her to a lonely-looking young man who was keeping watch over a concession stand, and though he looked bored stiff, Freya couldn't help but smile as she skipped up to him.

"Hullo," she addressed, giving him a polite curtsy. "Why aren't you dancing with everyone else?"

"I've got this booth to run!" he replied. "And besides, I don't have a date!"

“Well you can forget about this place!” exclaimed Freya, circling around until she was in the booth with the young man. “My uncle Fisher will be running things here. He says that it’s not right for young people to go through a holiday without celebrating it, so what’s say we go out and have some fun?!”

“You mean you’ll be my date?” blurted the young man. Freya smiled and nodded her head.

“Of course! I can’t let anyone be lonely like that! It’s horrible! Oh, my name is Freya! I’m so sorry; I’m very bad at introductions!”

“It’s all right,” shrugged the young Burmecian, taking her outstretched elbow. They linked up, and began walking towards the fair like they had been together all of their lives. Freya smiled, and even though she had really just met this young man, she was liking him already.

“So what’s your name?” she asked.

“Fratley,” said the man. “Fratley Irontail.” Freya smiled, and continued to lead the way until they had both arrived at the main Burmecian square. With the clouds parted temporarily, the entire city was aglow with sunlight, making the wonderful

holiday seem even more festive. At least a dozen musicians were gathered around, playing music so lively and powerful that it would make even the laziest or moodiest of people stand up and dance. Fratley smiled as the music cued up—of course, he didn't need to ask if his date wanted to dance. Freya was more than willing to accept the invitation.

Sun Festivals came and went, and Freya and Fratley grew very close together. A spark had been lit on that day; the two began to date, first in groups and then by themselves. They grew quite close together, and though real dedication, trust, and love were some ways away, it was already the start of a wonderful relationship. Their dreams in life were very similar: Fratley wanted to become the best lancer in the world, and Freya wanted to become a mighty Dragoon, worthy of serving in the courts of the King himself.

Because their dreams were so alike, Fratley and Freya also bonded during their military training. They had both joined the ranks of Dragoon trainees when they turned eighteen years old, and already they showed the skills necessary to fulfill such dreams. Both Freya and Fratley quickly climbed up in rank, attaining levels higher and higher, until they were besting even their masters. It was obvious that

the two had innate talents; perhaps those talents would one day help defend the country...?

When Freya and Fratley graduated from the Burmecian military, they had attained the ranks of Master Dragoons, which was actually a step up from the normal dragoons that served the city. They were both eligible to either continue their training until they became Generals, or else go into service for the royal court. Fratley had wanted to become a General, and this was but one issue where the two did not see eye-to-eye. Thankfully, Freya allowed Fratley his wish, and instead started to serve under the King. They were both twenty-two standard years old by this time.

Fratley and Freya became what might've been considered secret lovers. In the time that Freya spent serving the King, she was not allowed much time for outside pursuits, while Fratley's training kept him occupied as well. The two would sometimes sneak out at night and share quality time underneath the cloudy skies, almost as if they were teenagers again. This relationship continued for some time.

So in general, it was safe to say that Freya's life in Burmecia was a peaceful and wonderful one. The friends she had acquired there grew up, and some

married and had families of their own. Her uncle, who had helped hone her fighting skills long before she entered the military, died peacefully one day, as did her aunt, and although these were hard times for Freya, she still had Fratley as a support.

“It was strange,” Freya would think to herself sometimes. “In the beginning, I had my original parents and that little girl that uncle Fisher mentioned. They were the ones that held my hand when I was scared or alone. Then I lost them, but I gained uncle Fisher and aunt Chloe in return. And now, I’ve lost them too, but... Haha, now I have Fratley here. I would not like to think what would happen to me if I lost him, as well...”

But time passed, and the normally-idyllic life that Freya had been living grew sour. Times became bad, for one reason or another, and people began to leave the city to find their fortunes elsewhere. It was only the stubborn who clung to the rainy city; everyone else, Fratley included, left to pursue other ideals. Freya would have followed her love to the ends of the world, but it had been around this time when her family was closing in on Death’s door, and she was not one to leave a dying family behind. So Freya stayed, and loved them until their last day, and never heard of Fratley again for almost five weeks.

It took a lot to finally get Freya to leave Burmecia—or maybe, it took nothing at all. The Dragoon had finally completed her terms of service to the King shortly after her family's death, and so asked the King for some vacation time to herself. One day, as she was relaxing in her home, news came of Sir Fratley's death, and the ghosts of rumors whispered that it had been a woman named Beatrix that slew him. Freya did not believe this, and left Burmecia on a quest to ascertain the truth. She would be gone from her home for five whole years, and when she came back.....

When she came back, Freya would find her home in ruins, and she would find the friend she had lost so long ago. Neither woman recognized the other, although if one looked especially close, one could see a tear make its way down Beatrix's eye as she spotted the dragoon. It was almost as if..... almost... as if a memory had been invoked... But this memory didn't last long, and the two best friends, who had held each other and expressed their love, began to fight.

It was horrible, and in a way, it was so, so beautiful... So beautiful...

Ironically, when Freya met Fratley next, he did not remember who she was. “We spent our entire lives together!” Freya thought. She would have expressed these feelings, but..... “I love you! I still do! And... I don’t care if you remember me or not!”

But she did, she did. Freya could not stop weeping every time Fratley looked at her, and although there was a definite sparkle of familiarity in his eyes from time to time, it faded before he could grasp onto it. “Master Dragoon? A dance? Freya Crescent? Burmecia? I..... don’t know... I don’t know what any of it is...”

“To be forgotten..... is worse than death...”

“To be forgotten is worse than death,” said uncle Fisher once. “Don’t you ever forget what happened to yer home, Freya. Many people died in that massacre, and yer one’uh the few people that survived. You were only a little’un round’ that time, so ah guess you wouldn’t really remember anyway. But darlin’, don’t you ever forget what happened, you understand? Cuz’ if you forget... then who’ll be left to remember all those people that died?”

“If you forget who I am, Sir Fratley, then who will remember how much you loved me?”

“If you forget who I am, Beatrix... then we may as well be enemies.”

But all of that was just a memory now. All those flames, all the screaming, all the painful separation... it was but a memory, long since distant, and soon to be gone completely. A past life, living in a small village? A childhood friend, missing from one's mind? Parents? It had all..... passed on. All of that was just a memory now, and the important thing was that Beatrix perform this stunt right, or else fail in front of thousands.

As if she would. She had practiced this trick multiple times, and could probably pull it off better than the person that taught it to her. The odds of her messing it up were unbelievably low, and even if she did slip, there was a safety net below. Beatrix was an expert of the tightrope, but in fact she was practically a jack—or jill—of all trades. She could do anything given to her, provided she had enough training. Beatrix had been a part of the P.S. Circus now for the better part of ten years, and in that long period of time, she had practically forgotten about her past life in D'negel.

Beatrix had sprouted from a little girl into a young lady. Because of her constant workout, she was very thin and limber, perfect for performing stunts that larger people had no hope of accomplishing. Her long, wooden-brown hair flowed past her shoulders an inch, and though parts of it got in her eye at times, she could either wipe it away or else use the other. She was also quite beautiful for one so young, but it was definite that although she had grown quite a bit in the past ten years, she still had time to grow even more.

Beatrix was but one of the many children that had been taken in by the kindly Phineas Shekkel. Almost every single one of them were orphans; very few people were there by choice, although it was a wonderful place to grow up, and there were always friends around. Like all the other children, Beatrix looked unto Phineas as a father figure, and unto his wife a mother, and unto her fellow performers, brothers and sisters.

Beatrix made no flaws in her performance, and the audience cheered her on until the next act was shown.

One day, Beatrix couldn't help but notice that some of the older members of the circus were no

longer there. She spoke to her “father” about this, and in his sagely patriarchal wisdom, Phineas calmly explained that, when the time was right, most of his “children” usually went on to carve their own destiny in life. This would explain their absence, but Beatrix (in her naïve youth) couldn’t understand why anybody would want to leave the circus. It was a literal paradise, and although the work was hard sometimes, it was worth it to see the audience cheer and smile.

One day, news spread across the world that the legendary warrior, the Great Atma, was making a pilgrimage to Alexandria Kingdom. His purpose was most likely to seek new students to pass his skills unto, or else to train his current pupils in a new environment. Even Beatrix had heard of the Great Atma—who hadn’t?! The man was a living myth: though a little ancient of days, Atma was quite possibly the strongest human in the world, and probably the wisest and most skilled as well. His reputation preceded him, hence the reason why there was such an uproar all across Gaia.

Atma only took those students who he felt strong enough to endure his training, which meant that he would only work with the best. Sometimes, though, his reasoning would puzzle most other people, while

other times his logic made no sense even to those who claimed to understand the meaning behind everything. But, he could afford to be a little unpredictable—after all, everybody in the world, even evil people, respected him.

The legendary warrior Atma was the epitome of discipline, focus, power, and skill. No warrior could ever match up to Atma's awesome abilities. Hailing from the far East, Atma was a reserved warrior-monk who spent his years meditating, studying, and enjoying his last few moments on Gaia. Earlier in his life, Atma had single-handedly freed three nations from three very large and very powerful empires. Atma was also famous for introducing new techniques to the blacksmiths (hence the Atma-brand weapons and armor, which are the acme of excellence). But perhaps Atma's greatest claim to fame was the fact that he was one of the very few people that had ever been canonized while still living.

So when the P.S. Circus was asked to do a performance in his honor, of course they accepted, and Beatrix would be heading to Alexandria for the first time.

The entire circus was quite large, with performers and animals and tents and everything else, so they had to camp outside the castle when they arrived. It was still a magnificent place to see, even from the outside, and the decorative sword shining in the skies brought a sense of pride to Beatrix's heart. Even during the night, the young performer could be seen staring at the sword, almost as if she were looking at her destiny...

Phineas, of course, could see her looking at the large ornament. He was perhaps the only person alive who understood Beatrix's lust for the mighty weapon. Though the memory had long been forgotten (except by him), Beatrix's parents had both been royal guards for Lindblum, but they retired and moved to D'negel when their daughter was born. The spirit of a warrior was in Beatrix's veins, even though she herself was unaware of this. Phineas merely let out a breath as he watched his "daughter", and prayed that their stay would be filled with smiles and revelry.

Dawn came early, and Beatrix greeted it along with her friends and family. The entire troupe was decked out in their most festive wear: some clowns, others jugglers and acrobats, others tamers, some daredevils, and the usual assortment of

miscellaneous performers. Beatrix was in her usual exotic knife-throwing outfit: a short red skirt, a black tank top, and wristbands and other jewels strung across her body. From the look of things, this was going to be one of the biggest celebrations of them all.

As discreetly as they could, the circus began setting things up just outside the castle. The town was far too small to hold everything, and besides, it was such a nice day outside that it would be criminal to stay indoors! It took most of the morning for everyone to set things up, and they worked even during the early hours of the afternoon. Master Atma would show up at a time when nobody expected him, so things had to be ready. There were a few guards keeping watch from all sides, so the Alexandrians would have a little warning beforehand.

Suddenly, one of the guards sprinted past the circus, shouting out “He’s here, he’s here!!” Within moments, all of Alexandria was thrown into chaos, and a flood of people stormed out of the castle gates to see. The people from the circus tried to vie for viewing positions as well, and soon the entire area was thick with people. Beatrix was cramped in-between a large muscle-bound strongman and a fire-

breather, and couldn't see a thing in front of her. However, the strongman was kind enough to let her sit on his shoulders, and several dwarves and midgets also took advantage of the taller ones' height.

Suddenly, a blanket of silence smothered the raucous din. Not even the birds sang, not even the dogs barked, not even the babies wailed. Quietly, silently, without a single sound, Atma walked into the town. Nobody followed him, nobody preceded him, he came alone. It was only a few minutes later when his students arrived, but by that time, they had been deemed invisible.

Atma was a tall man, taut and svelte, with a long black goatee that reached to his neck. His thin black mustache was well-braided, and it too hung down past his chin. His eyes were halfway open as he walked, his creamy-tanned skin burning with a warm glow. The nails on his index and pinky fingers were long and pointed, his hands clasped together in what looked like prayer. His head was completely bald, save for a single braid of very long hair that slithered down past his shoulders. He wore the simple robe of a monk from eastern shores: red, with a gold lining. Sandals covered his traveling feet.

In the silence of the day, Atma quietly stepped through the crowd, wordlessly parting the populous. Each and every warrior awaited to see if he would say or do anything, especially if he was looking for more students. After all, to learn under the world's greatest fighter was an honor beyond everything else. Silently, as he finally waded through the crowd, Atma bowed at the King and Queen, turned around, and placed his hands behind his back.

“It is good to be back here,” he said in a calm and slightly scratchy voice. “I have been long absent from this place. Allow my students and myself to rest for a brief period, then I shall attend the festivities you have kindly organized for me.” He smiled and bowed again, and a short trail of much younger people followed him—must’ve been his students.

There were only three people in the whole group: two males and a female. The girl was very tall and muscular, with a cold, piercing look to her face. She was scantily-dressed, like an Amazon, and was carrying a sword at her side. One of the men was a wide-eyed youth who appeared to have just recently joined Atma, and the other was a stoic man wearing a brownish-orange cloak. One of his eyes was a dull brown, and the other was covered up with a patch.

Beatrix watched all four of them walk into the kingdom, but her eyes caught the sight of the man with a patch. He had only his left eye, but when he turned to gaze at her, a cold chill went up Beatrix's spine. The man looked in her direction for only a second, then passed on into the castle.

Slowly, the citizens of Alexandria filed back into their domain, leaving the performers to continue setting up. Beatrix was still a little shaken from the glare she had received, and tried her best to wave it away as she continued to help prepare things. If time allowed her, she would practice her knife-throwing skills, and perhaps they would even get a chance to see who Atma's new student would be!

The performance was one of utter magnificence. Everybody literally went all-out as they gave Alexandria their best show, and the King and Queen were in such a joyous uproar that they both nearly had heart attacks. The performance was declared Alexandria's single greatest event since the Wonderful Hunt of Dragons a few centuries back. Beatrix (and the others) even got to see Atma and his students perform a few stunts themselves, and though the Amazon and the young boy were impressive in their own right, it was the man with the eye patch that fascinated Beatrix the most.

To be sure, Atma himself was a sight to behold. His speed and technique were absolutely unequalled. But it was the one-eyed student who really impressed Beatrix. He couldn't have been too much older than herself, and though he looked like an ordinary man, he was in fact matching Atma's moves very precisely. The two had been sparring for the crowd's entertainment, and while everyone expected Atma to be stunning as usual, nobody had expected the one-eyed man to put on his own show.

"That's absolutely fascinating!" whispered Beatrix to herself as she watched. "Here we are, watching the greatest fighter in the world spar with what looks like a common woodsman, and yet he's matching the Master blow for blow. And he has only one eye! Ha... I wonder, how long did he have to train before he could fight like that?"

Although she didn't know it at the time, Beatrix wouldn't have to wait long to hear the answer.

The circus lasted well into the night, and by the time the performance was completely over, it was already dark outside. Most people had shuffled home sleepily, or else they simply snapped themselves awake until they could get back home. The performers would stay busy, however, as they

had to take everything down once again. Beatrix, however, had earned some time off, and so with her knife-thrower outfit still on, she began to wander around in the cool summer night.

In the darkness, the crickets sang and the stars glowed merrily. The two moons of Gaia gazed down like the eyeballs of God, and the weather was so nice that Beatrix felt more comfortable than she had all day. It had been a very successful show that day, albeit a long one, but it had been worth it to welcome Atma into the kingdom.

As Beatrix walked around, she noticed a familiar-looking man sitting on a rock, staring into the sky. His arms were hidden inside his cloak, so the only part visible was his head. Beatrix recognized him as the man with the eye patch, and since she had been so impressed by his “performance” earlier that day, she decided to go up to him and strike a conversation.

“Leave,” said the man before she could open her mouth. Beatrix drew back a little, her face twisted in confusion.

“Huh?”

“I want to be alone,” said the man. His voice was very rough, but altogether emotionless and flat. Quietly, Beatrix ignored his orders and continued towards him.

“I saw you performing with Master Atma,” she said. “I must say, that was the most incredible thing I’ve ever seen. How did you manage to do that?”

“I have been traveling with Master Atma for many years now,” he answered flatly. A pause.

“Oh. Well, uh, what’s your name?”

“Luke.” Another pause.

“Oh, I see. Well, that’s a nice name. I’m Beatrix.” The one-eyed man silently turned towards the girl, a slight growl in his throat as he gazed at her. His face was as emotional as a rock—hard as one too—and his single dull-brown eye pierced Beatrix’s. He had dusty brown hair, and wore a cloak not suited for the summer.

“I didn’t ask for your name.”

“Well, yeah, but I thought I’d introduce myself,” she shrugged. He snorted, and continued to stare at the sky.

“By this time next month, Master Atma will have found a suitable student to teach. Out of the three he has already, I am the oldest, both in age and in the order he received them. I was able to fight him today because he has trained me well.”

“You’re certainly opening up to me well,” noted Beatrix wryly. “What, have you fallen for the knife-girl or something?” Instead of answering her right away, Luke instead stood up, and raised his eye to the dark sky. He closed it, and breathed in the warm night air, and growled like a wolf.

“Master Atma knows who he will teach,” he said suddenly. Before Beatrix could ask Luke what he meant, he answered her silent question and continued. “He has known for a very long time, now. This certain someone lives right here, in this kingdom, and he has asked myself and the others to look for them. That is why I am opening up to you.” Beatrix, her face back to looking puzzled, shook her head and asked what he meant.

“Huh? You mean... no! You can’t mean that I’m his—”

“I didn’t say that,” interrupted Luke. “I just meant that it could be anybody, even a simple knife-girl like you. He just told me to watch out, and the

results will come to bear in the future. That is all.” Luke then sat back down, turned his back on Beatrix, and stared into the distance. The orphaned circus girl paused and bit her lip anxiously. There was something... strange about this man... something she could not quite place.

Yes, he was one of Atma’s current students, and he was indeed skilled. But there was something else there, lurking somewhere beneath the glassy eye, the patch protecting the other, and the impassive face—and Beatrix was going to find out what it was. People didn’t act like that for no reason, so there had to be something that made him that way...

He must be very skilled if he can learn from Master Atma with only one eye, she thought to herself. Perhaps one day, I may be that skilled...

Beatrix was a light sleeper, so she woke up early in the morning before everyone else. The circus was leaving that evening, and so that day would be the last that she would spend in Alexandria—probably. However, even though it was early dawn, news still spread fast in the kingdom. Atma had apparently chosen his student already—which Beatrix already knew, sort of—and already, half of the people of the

castle had gathered to hear his declaration. Beatrix was but one of them.

The whole town was thick with people, but Atma, his students, and the King and Queen had all been given a special spot on a platform just slightly higher up than the crowd. It was here where Atma would select his new student from the mix, and though it seemed a rather hasty decision, again—Master Atma’s unpredictability was a freedom he seemed to exercise well. So, as spontaneous as it seemed, he was ready to announce who would next learn under him.

“Greetings, Alexandrians,” he began, polite as always. “I know that this news is short in coming, but I have long known whom I was to pass my skills unto. This woman you see, Sara, was in my dreams long before I ever met her, and these two men, Luke and Matthew, were also long ago ordained to learn under me. This might perhaps explain the spontaneity of my choices, and it will now make clear my next choice. But first, let us have a little fun.

“Will all the men in the town sit down? Please, all the men sit down. The one I have dreamt about most recently was a woman, so please—all men, sit

down.” Slowly, one by one, all the males in Alexandria groaned and positioned themselves on the floor, leaving a large handful of women still standing. There was little surprise in Atma’s decision so far—after all, Alexandria was practically ruled by women.

“Thank you,” he said. ‘Now, I would like for all ladies over the age of thirty years to be seated. Again, all ladies over thirty years old, please sit.’ And so they did, leaving a smaller number standing. “Thank you. Now, all the women who did not have any brothers or sisters, remain standing.”

Little by little, the number of candidates for Atma’s regime decreased. More and more women were being seated, leaving fewer and fewer behind. Atma was well-known for having interpreting many other people’s dreams, so if he had received a vision about his next student, this image was to be carried out in full. Next, all the women who were brunettes were asked to stand, then all those whose birthdays were in April. And, to her great shock, Beatrix realized that she had yet to sit down.

Next came women whose named did not begin with a vowel (Atma had strange ways, and few people could really claim to understand his

reasons), and then women who were older than twenty sat down. If any girl was missing a body part, she was seated, or if she had an illness, she was seated as well. Soon, after about thirty minutes of this had passed, Beatrix found that, with the exception of one other woman, she was the only one standing. Several people laughed uncomfortably as they took a peek at the ladies, and neither one of them looked to be material for Atma's studentship.

"...And now," continued the Master, "since there is only two left standing, I will be very specific about my dream. The girl that came to my visions was born in a very small village, to two parents she did not know well. Her entire life was consumed by flames, but she was taken in by a wandering group of performers. Do either of you two girls match that description?"

Meekly, Beatrix raised her hand, and the other woman slowly sat down. Atma merely smiled, and welcomed the girl to the stage; Sara the Amazon was impassive, while Matthew seemed to smile, and Luke... well, Luke was just Luke.

"You must be joking!" blurted Queen Brahne. "Master Atma! Surely not this circus performer!"

Surely there must be some other fine warrior lying in this kingdom!”

“I apologize, but I have grown to rely on my dreams very much,” said Atma coolly. He turned towards Beatrix, smiled, and would have spoken his congratulations if he hadn’t been interrupted by the King.

“Now wait just a second!” he shouted. “Master Atma, though we trust your judgment, we are still skeptical about your decision! Permit us to bring forth our mightiest knight, in that we may see if the girl truly has any skills at all!”

“You may do as you wish,” said Atma, ‘but my decision is final.’ He then turned back to Beatrix, and smiled as he spoke to her without interruption. “Remember, young one: what is on the outside is not always that which is on the inside. I do not even know your name, yet something tells me that you have the potential for greatness.”

“Beatrix,” smiled the girl, performing a small curtsy. “Just call me Beatrix.”

“Beatrix it is,” smiled Atma, and even though the King was still doubtful of the choice, Atma now had his newest and youngest student. Before any

celebration could be called, however, the King shouted out to the squadron of soldiers standing at attention, and asked for the highest-ranking knight in the kingdom—or, at least, to Beatrix’s mild annoyance, the highest-ranking male knight.

He was a somewhat large guy that would intimidate any of his female subordinates, and would perhaps even make a few superiors feel small. He wore shiny steel armor, and his smile was mostly pasted on, and the sword he had was larger than Beatrix’s arm. His name was Lieutenant Adelbert Steiner, and he would be Beatrix’s opponent.

“What? You, my opponent?” he scoffed. “Bah! She would not be a challenge!”

“I’m not a trained swordsman!” insisted Beatrix fearfully, gazing into Atma’s face. The tall monk merely stared ahead, his arms folded before him.

“Have strength, child,” he assured her. “If you cannot endure this test, then I have wasted my time. Please, show us how truly skilled you are. Surely you have learned things in the circus. Use those skills to survive.” Beatrix sighed, took another deep breath, and braced herself. Always a man of good sport, Steiner loaned the girl a sword designed for

women, as if the match couldn't get any more gender-biased than it already was.

The crowd became fiercely animated in a very short time as the future student and the skilled swordsman met in battle. Steiner had the edge in almost every single aspect except for agility, which Beatrix owned. She was shorter, thinner, and considerably more limber than the bulky Steiner, and kept the big guy on his toes throughout most of the match. She had never used swords before in her life, except during a performance, so she was obviously lacking. The match seemed one-sided, and had it not been for Beatrix's speed and tenacity, she would have lost long ago.

The battle drawled on longer than necessary, but the end result was that Steiner won. Beatrix had been defeated, but not very badly: her sword had been knocked away by Steiner's strength, leaving her weaponless in the fight. The older knight declared victory, but was still gracious enough to offer his assistance to Beatrix. She helped herself to her feet, and secretly swore that one day, she would have a rematch with that man.....

But for the time being, Beatrix would learn under Master Atma. Along with his other three students,

Beatrix became a temporary part of Alexandria: she trained around there, she commuted with the people there, and she even became something of an overnight celebrity. Of course, there was the matter of parting ways with the circus...

That time was the most difficult of Beatrix's life—after surviving the destruction of her hometown, of course. She and the family she had grown with spent many long hours embracing and saying final farewells, and her time spent parting with Phineas was the worst of them all, but the old man assured them all that “there comes a time when a child must leave the nest in which they have grown up in, and although it saddens me to see my adopted daughter leave, I can find no greater pride in her. And Beatrix, even if you had never been chosen, I would still love you as closely as I do even now”.

And so, as midnight approached, Beatrix waved a sad farewell to the family she had grown up in. She could not wave farewell forever, so she eventually turned around and went back into the kingdom, where all the other students were sleeping—all, that is, except for Luke. He was sitting on the roof of the church, looking out at the landscape before him, emotionless and inactive as ever. Beatrix joined him.

“Hello, Luke,” she greeted him. “Lovely night to look at stars.”

“If you say so,” he shrugged. Beatrix paused just long enough to scoot in closer.

“You knew it was me all along, didn’t you?” He shrugged.

“Not even Master Atma knew for certain. He was just given that vague description. In fact, he claims that the narrowing process he used came to him in his dream as well, if you can believe it.”

“Do you?” A long, long pause hung in the gentle night air, so long in fact that Beatrix began to wonder if he had even heard her. She almost repeated herself.

“There is nothing left in my life to believe in,” he answered gruffly. “...Nothing even to live for, except hope that one day, I may do something that redeems my sins.”

“Ohhhh...” Beatrix nodded her head, and slowly began to understand her fellow student. Apparently, he was distraught because of some past crime he had committed—but Beatrix couldn’t believe that there actually existed a crime so evil that it would make a man dive into isolation like this.

*“So what’d you do?” she asked. “Kill a priest?”
A pause.*

“Yes.” Beatrix had asked that question as a dark joke, but she didn’t expect that it would actually be his answer! She gasped in horror as he curtly answered her question, and even went as far as covering her own mouth. On Gaia, one of the worst crimes a person could ever commit would be to murder a man of faith. It was not quite as bad as assassinating a member of the monarchy, though not by much. Criminals guilty of such a sin were either sent into exile (as Luke had, Beatrix later learned), or they were sent to Evil Island where the dreaded Yan dwelled.

No wonder Luke was so distant. Why Master Atma had chosen him as a student was a mystery, but then again, the old monk himself was a mystery. Slowly, as Beatrix absorbed what Luke told her—all three letters of it—she placed her hand on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. Luke snorted and stood to leave.

“Yeah? Well, so am I, Trixie. So am I.”

Three years passed, and Beatrix turned from a thin fifteen year-old girl into a beautiful and powerful eighteen year-old woman. Her training with Atma was paying off in every way: she was quickly becoming strong, and very skilled, especially with the sword. After chancing upon a public training session, the King and Queen became impressed with Beatrix's growing skills—so much so that they enlisted her in the Alexandrian army.

Beatrix's rank grew almost as fast as her skills did. She would most definitely be bucking for Lieutenant by the end of that year, and if her training with Atma should ever be completed, she would probably end up as a General—exactly one rank ahead of her former adversary, Steiner, who had recently been promoted as Captain. Obviously, the steel warrior was a little upset at this, and dedicated his skills to outlasting and outwitting his most recent rival.

There was also a change in the royal lineup during this time. Princess Garnet, the young daughter of the Queen and King, was stricken with serious illness and died around her sixth year. Although this saddened the King and Queen greatly, a blessing from Heaven literally sailed their way in

the form of a young girl who looked exactly like their deceased daughter—except she had a horn.

The horn was removed, and the little girl was secretly adopted as the daughter of the royal family. Only the King, Queen, and a few very close advisors knew about this arrangement, and Beatrix herself did not discover the change until later on. Until that time came, she would grow in skill... as well as grow close to Luke, who—ever since their first nightly meeting, had started to shed a little more of his dark and isolated ways. He and Beatrix were growing close at a slow rate, and probably would have become friends by the end of the month if something major didn't happen between them.....

One day, after their training exercise, Luke and Beatrix shared some quiet time to themselves. They had both grown much in the years that had passed, although it was Beatrix who did the most growing. She was now as skilled and as strong as Steiner was, though the other knight would forever have an advantage of sheer brute strength (which wasn't a problem). However, not even she could've defeated Luke in combat, though she had tried on multiple occasions. Even with one eye, the impassive man was a tough challenge to overcome, and one of which Beatrix could not beat.

Even though she knew better, Beatrix could not help but be drawn to the older man. She felt attached to him in a way... She felt a kind of love towards him: she wanted to free him of the guilt and the anguish he was putting himself through, and instead wanted it replaced with all the good and kindness she knew was lurking within. Luke was not a bad person, in short: he just did bad things.

“Good evening, Luke,” greeted Beatrix with a smile. Luke grumbled back at her.

“Yeah...”

“How are you faring this evening?”

“Suicidal as always,” he grunted. Beatrix sighed and gave him a motherly glare.

“Luke... please... don’t do this to yourself... Is your life so full of misery? Can you find no joy in things at all?”

“There is nothing for me here,” he answered, gazing at her emptily. “...Nothing. The only thing I am good for now is fighting. I won’t ever atone for my crimes, so it’s best to hope for a brutal demise and end it all. I have nothing to live for anymore.” Despite his ever-present dark mood, Beatrix couldn’t help but look at him with sympathy... nor with love.

She slowly walked up to him, took his rough hands into her own, and smiled warmly.

“You have me,” she answered. Luke sighed, and for the first time Beatrix had known him, he almost looked like he had an emotion.

“Lady Beatrix...”

“I don’t want to see you suffering all by yourself,” said the younger woman gently. “I know you’ve done awful things in the past, but it’s time to get over them. How old are you again? Twenty-three?”

“.....Yes.”

“You still have your whole life ahead of you!” she stated softly. “Luke, please... this life is already too painful and short as it is. Do you really want to continue suffering like this?” A pause. For the first time in years, Luke actually thought about something worthwhile, and considered what she said.

“.....I..... I..... I... don’t... know...” Beatrix gazed into his single brown eye, and placed two tender hands on his cheeks.

“Luke... we’ve known each other for three years, and... I don’t like to see somebody I’ve known for that long in a bad mood. I hate to see you suffer, Luke, so please... let me be your reason for living...” Luke’s eyes slowly widened in amazement, and his stoic face grew gentle, albeit a little surprised. He sighed, closed his eyes, shook his head, and succeeded in looking defeated.

“...Lady Beatrix...”

“Please...” she whispered. Luke’s single eye gazed into hers, and she gave him a smile that she knew he needed. To her joy, he smiled back, and suddenly leaned forward to peck her cheek. He drew back for but a second, and placed another kiss directly onto her lips.

One more year passed.

Slowly, Luke recovered from his morose depression, and with the help of his new “reason for living”, he gradually returned to the world of lights and happiness. He would still have trouble expressing emotions every once in awhile, but patient Beatrix helped him through it all. They were officially a couple by now, and although they had never expressed their love, a few “thank-yous” here and there from Luke was expression enough.

Yes, the two of them had drawn close over the months... so close that now they talked almost like two normal people.

“You are looking good,” noted Luke, complimenting her on her new clothes. Beatrix smiled and thanked him. She had just been promoted to Captain, and was now on the same level as Steiner, who might’ve been stuck on that tier for years to come if Beatrix didn’t “motivate” him properly. She was wearing the garb that Captains wore: white mantle, red breastplate with stockings and gauntlets, and the Queen’s own personal rose insignia on the back.

The two idly chatted for a few seconds more, and their time spent together would’ve ended up being very idyllic if it hadn’t been interrupted so soon. The two of them encountered a very large horde of very dangerous monsters, and although two students of Atma would normally not have a problem with such villains, they were both without weapons—even Luke, who had made carrying his sword around with him a habit, was defenseless.

“Beatrix! Stay close to me!” he shouted. “Protect my back and I’ll protect yours!” She nodded an affirmative and stood at his back, watching the large

army of enemies gather around them. There were far too many for them to fight barehanded, though Atma had taught them martial arts. When the enemies did close in and attack, Beatrix and Luke each let out a roar, and began pummeling everything in sight. Most of the creatures were nothing worse than imps or goblins, but there had been a dragon or two in the mix as well.

Even without weapons, Beatrix and Luke easily dispatched at least $\frac{3}{4}$ of the monsters there, leaving the rest to either run off or run forward. Those that did escape were left to fend for themselves; those that stayed would be executed quickly. But somehow, in the midst of the battle, the mightiest of all the dumb creatures stormed in for a vicious attack. It shredded with its claws, and would have ripped Beatrix apart if Luke hadn't stepped in at the very last second to shield her body.

“NOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!” was the only thing Beatrix could scream, as the man who had finally found some joy in life began to die right in front of her eyes. Enraged beyond measure, Beatrix stormed forth and summoned a secret technique taught to her by Atma: she used a little bit of her own life-force to increase her strength, and with the extra aura of power surging through her body, she snapped the

dragon's head like it was made out of dry tree branches.

The dragon fell to the floor in a dead heap—but so did Luke, who was so bloodied up with scars that he was literally red all over. Beatrix's voice came out in a desperate, hoarse wail as she tried to save what little life there was left in the man. She knew a little white magic, and perhaps with the right incantation, she.....

“Don't,” grunted Luke, brushing her hands aside with his own. He coughed violently several times, and to her surprise, he smiled up at her and took her hands into his own. “...Lady Beatrix..... you were right... You were... my reason... for living... and for dying...”

“Luke, please...”

“No, it's my time,” he whispered weakly. “I've... finally... atoned for my crimes, Beatrix... And now... I can... finally... rest...” His smile grew, and his shivering hand slowly rose to stroke her cheek. Beatrix wept bitterly, and held his cold hand with her own.

“Luke, please...”

“Thank you,” he groaned, “for..... being my... reason... to live... lady... Beatrix..... It was wonderful... while... it lasted... thank you... thank you...” And with that, his smile grew even more, and he whispered his last, and then, Luke fell asleep.

“Luke! No! You won’t die! Please, no! Luke, please get up! I won’t allow you to die! Get up! Please!” But Luke did not get up—he stayed down, dead for good, motionless, and altogether gone from the world. Beatrix was so stricken from sadness that she didn’t know whether to scream out in agony, or to weep over him bitterly. She instead chose to hug his unresponsive body close, and to mourn over him silently.

“Luke..... I can’t believe you’re.....” She choked on her own words, hiccupped, and sniffled until her eyes were bleary and red. Just then, she noticed his eye patch: the same small piece of cloth that was covering his right eye. Luke had never told Beatrix why he lost the use of that eye, but she did know that he had been living without it for quite some time.

If a man like Luke could be so strong and skilled with the use of only one eye... then what example was there for Beatrix? Slowly, and still shedding a

few tears, Beatrix gently removed the patch, and smiled slightly at the slashed socket. Luke had been a warrior even with a handicap, and ever since she first became Atma's student, Beatrix had envied his strength, and his skill, and wanted so desperately to be as good as he was...

And so, as the sun slowly began to rise, Beatrix dried her eyes and stood to greet the new day. She held her hair up just long enough to tie Luke's eye patch over her own face, and placed the cloth over her own right eye. It was a perfectly fine piece of bodily equipment, and no doubt there'd be some person who would inquire about it, but unless they were as close to Beatrix as Luke had been, she would never really tell them the significance of the patch.

If he can go through life with a handicap... she thought, and still emerge a great warrior... then I wonder what it could do to me... And so, with a sigh and a solemn smile, Beatrix greeted the new day with her new handicap. Though she had lost one so dear, her heart in fact never felt more light.

"For you, dear one," she said. "I shall wear this badge of honor for you."

The day finally came when Beatrix graduated from Atma's training. After Luke's death, the woman dedicated the rest of her time to training under the Master, and her efforts paid off around the time of her twenty-fifth birthday. She had spent the last ten years of her life studying the ways of Atma, and now could genuinely boast of being one of the greatest warriors in the world. She was already an Alexandrian General, and had even inherited Save the Queen as a token of her skills. She was Commander of all the knights and soldiers in Alexandria, and had the strength to back her rank up.

So when Beatrix graduated from Atma's classes, she and the ancient Master met for the last time.

"It has been a very fascinating road for you, has it not?"

"...More like 'exhausting', Master," sighed the new General. "I've experienced so much in my life that it's a wonder I'm still sane. But, I have my sword, and my liege, and I have your skills, and the compassion taught to me by my adoptive father... So really, Master Atma, there is little you need to teach me." The Great Atma smiled, and bowed deeply in respect, and of course Beatrix bowed back.

Suddenly, the Master rushed forth with a blinding speed, and swept at Beatrix's legs, causing her to plummet to the ground. A light chuckle came from the Master as he helped her up.

"...Little, except, 'always keep your guard up'," he said with a smile. Beatrix matched his smile as well, and gave the old man a hug. They bade each other farewell, and Master Atma journeyed away to the East, where he would most likely retire. Beatrix took great honor in the fact that she had been his very last student, and later in life, she would have even more honor in knowing that she had been the very last person Atma saw before vanishing away.

After that day, he was never seen again.

A single sigh escaped Beatrix's nostrils as she stirred and woke. The hour was so early that the sun was barely up, yet even though she felt tired enough to sleep forever, there was something stirring up inside her that just wouldn't let her rest. Slowly, with her nightgown still on, Beatrix shuffled towards her small private bathroom and lit a few candles. She took another deep breath and yawned twice before rubbing the sleep out of both of her eyes.

Slowly, she tied her brunette hair back and gazed into her face.

Still as pretty as ever, she thought with a smile. With her hair in an unusual ponytail, Beatrix could see her entire face, plus both naked eyes. The patch was by her bedside, ready to conceal a mysterious secret, but for now it would lay still. Beatrix smiled and touched the mirror with one hand, while examining her face with the other. By all standards, she was still young and virile, and of course she was still strong enough to battle an ogre hand-to-hand. Her smile was still pretty, and a wrinkle or a gray hair was still several years into the future.

So why do I suddenly feel so old? she asked herself. Beatrix lost the smile and tried on her most depressing blank stare. She had a definite sense of darkness to her eyes, and her lips pouted out slightly in a cold snarl. She released her long hair and let it cover up all her face, then disrobed completely before stepping into the showers. The water was painfully delicious to the touch, but somehow, all joy had left Beatrix's body.

She should have been happier. It had only been about a week since the demise of Ignus. Sure, there was a lot of destruction and some deaths as well, but

that had all been seven days ago. The kingdom was undergoing repairs, and things seemed to be brightening up. Beatrix's heart and soul had been cleansed and renewed, and she had found a wonderful friend in Freya—again. There was a beloved King on the throne with a wonderful Queen, and although the kingdom was on high alert thanks to the invasion, there was still an aura of peace around the kingdom.

Beatrix *should have* been on Cloud Nine considering what was going on—yes, she should have, but she wasn't. Whether she blamed it on her own paranoia, the fact that she couldn't handle changes well, her overprotective nature, or some other unknown emptiness, Beatrix had to admit that she just didn't feel right. Stepping out of the shower and drying her body and hair with towels, Beatrix gazed once again into the mirror and suddenly remembered the #1 reason why she was in such a rotten mood.

“Oh, right,” she muttered to herself. “Happy Birthday, twenty-nine year old Trixie.”

The time—a week after Kyahar Ignus' invasion ended

The place—Beatrix’s private bathroom in Alexandria Castle

The players—General Beatrix Francine de Alexandria, who is “celebrating” her birthday

The status—Monotony

Beatrix decided to dress casually that day. After all, she had a right. Rejecting her usual costume for the moment, Beatrix instead decided to pick out one of her few dresses that she owned. These comfortable garments, while nowhere near as pretty or elaborate as the Queen’s, were still very nice by any standards. Since Beatrix was prone to wearing her uniform, mostly because she was almost always on duty, she had had very little time for casual wear, and most of those suits were reserved for very special occasions.

After thinking about it, Beatrix rejected the dress idea and instead chose to go with something a little less fancy. No matter what happened that day, she was bound to encounter some kind of activity, so wearing a dress, even a plain one, would’ve been disastrous. The knight had to dig pretty deep into her undersized wardrobe to fish out what she had in mind, and when she brought it out to examine, she felt better already. It was a red kimono with a gold

lining, similar to what her Master Atma had worn, but this formal dress had a few chains of lilies embroidered into the cloth, and the cloth was orange instead of gold.

Trying it on made Beatrix feel even better, as compared to her military uniform, this was like wearing a warm blanket on a cold day. The kimono left her wrists and ankles bare, while a sleek cut had been made on either side, thus exposing a whisper of her thigh. Her upper chest was also visible, but to a length so reasonable that not even Zidane would've been interested. Also, wearing her hair down in the suit didn't seem right, and since it *was* her birthday that day, Beatrix decided for a little change, and tied her light-brown locks into a ponytail. Of course, the patch was also applied, and for the final surprise, *Save the Queen* was nowhere in sight.

But even this new ensemble did little to lighten Beatrix's mood. She was nowhere near the age where it was okay to worry about growing old, nor was she even close to a mid-life crisis. At 29 years young, Beatrix was still a young woman, and since she worked in a place where physical prowess was the norm, her body would most likely continue to look good well into her sixties (she could scarcely imagine herself drawing the stares of younger men

as she swirled her sword and whisked her gray hair out of her eyes). The knight had absolutely no excuse to be in such a negative mood, but it *was* her birthday, and the annual event allowed the participant to celebrate rights that they would otherwise never consider exercising.

Needless to say, even though she felt uneasy about some unknown thing, Beatrix managed to draw more than one stare from the knights in the castle. Most of the soldiers there didn't even recognize her, while some were dumbstruck with wonder. Nobody there had ever seen Beatrix wearing a ponytail, and only a few had ever seen her with anything other than her usual uniform (the wedding had been a rare exception). Nearly every single one of the men in the castle ogled her, some *much* more than others, and it seemed as if Beatrix was almost enjoying the attention.

Maybe I should do this more often, she thought with a smile. A pause. *Nahh...*

She continued to walk through the castle until she was at the main gate. The guards there nearly bowled over with surprise, but when they saw her eye patch, they slowly began to recognize her.

“General?” they said doubtfully. Beatrix nodded her head.

“Yes, it’s me,” she replied. They both stared at her as if they had never seen her before.

“...Wow!” they exclaimed. “...You look fantastic! Hey, did Captain Steiner ask you out on a date after all this time?”

“No,” she replied coolly, “I just thought... you know... why not? I mean, even I need to loosen up and enjoy myself, right?”

“Y-yes! Of course! Well, uh... enjoy yourself, I guess!” The guards saluted her, and she returned the gesture before heading towards the moat. The ferrywoman there gave Beatrix a similar reaction, and the General couldn’t help but groan as she suddenly realized that she would probably be hearing this sort of stuff all day. Of course, if she had left her patch back in her quarters, then she would’ve *really* been unrecognizable.

Alexandria Town usually didn’t get people that were dressed so exotically, so of course most of the townsfolk stared. A few of the men whistled and tipped hats as Beatrix walked by, and some of the ladies gasped and instantly began whispering to their

friends. Beatrix suddenly felt absolutely stupid—after all, it was not every day that the General was the center of attention. She meekly tried to hide herself, and managed to slip into a bar without drawing any more eyes.

Even the tender whistled at her, but considering the fact that Beatrix's sense of fashion was grossly limited, he had a reason to. She smiled amicably at him, and ordered the most powerful tea they had. The lovely young lady, whose mood had brightened despite her embarrassment, then sat down and drank her refreshment as questions once again flew through her mind.

So, today's my day off... she began....Well, they say that there's no rest for the wicked, and I've been in this business so long that I can't doubt it. Even though we've been through several days of peace, I still can't shake the idea that something bad's about to happen. I... well, I guess I'm really in a good mood, because I have a lot to be thankful for. And darnit, I haven't lost my touch in terms of looks either! Humility be screwed; I'm still as beautiful as I was eight years ago! In fact, I do believe that I've gotten better with age!

...Huh! That's last night's liquor talking. I actually got drunk last night, but can anybody blame me? Today was a day I really wasn't looking forward to....Gahh, I'm so pathetic! Worrying over the big Three-Oh! Ha!!! Ugh, if Freya found this out, I'd never hear the end of it...!

...Ah... I can't help but smile as I think about her. Wasn't it two years ago, around this time, that we were still pretty harsh enemies?...Seems that way. I... I really didn't detest her myself; I had nothing against her... But she, Oh did she hate me! But who could blame her? I pretty much helped massacre and destroy everyone and everything she ever loved! I was the reason that her love was lost! I caused her so much trouble and pain, and even now I don't think I've done enough to be her friend! I guess... that bond we had when we were kids was really powerful...

...A bond that brings two childhood friends together once again, even though they were once enemies... Sounds romantic, but I'm not really into that sort of thing....Now what was I griping about before I started thinking of Freya?...You know, it's funny. I can't remember.

Oh yeah, that bad feeling I had! Yeah! (If her highness caught me talking like this, ooooh, I'd get it!! Haha... but it's my birthday today, so I have an excuse) Erm, anyway, I'm just so concerned about what's going to happen next. Their majesties made it clear that there very well may be another enemy out there, and for once, I hope they're wrong. I'm so worn out from fighting that I'm almost tempted to cry.

.....Wow. This tea is really great!

As Beatrix's mind wandered from thought to thought, another dressed-down person walked into the bar. He, too, was unrecognizable without his uniform, and if he hadn't shouted something to the tender, Beatrix could've sworn that this was a newcomer to the kingdom. He was very well-built, with a small mop of very flat brown hair that looked to have been spiky in a previous life. He wore a large white shirt and bluish leggings, and his bare hands were holding some miscellaneous items.

"My good man! An ale to start me out today!" he shouted. When Beatrix turned around to see who had come in, she too did not recognize him. The voice was unmistakable, and so was the face. The man also noticed her, and also was unable to recall

her at first. But, almost at the exact same time, a name came to the face and they called out to each other.

“...Beatrix?”

“...Steiner?”

“Is that you?!?!” Both knights gawked at each other for awhile, then actually complimented each other.

“...You... you look... uhh... very nice, Beatrix...” stuttered Steiner. She smiled at his attempt.

“Likewise. I’ve never seen you without your armor. You actually look very nice.” His face reddened a bit, but luckily a cough saved him, and he grew a little more serious. Silently, he walked up to Beatrix and scratched his short hair.

“...Red seems to suit you very well,” he mumbled. “And... and... well, uh, your hair, uh.....It’s, uh..... it’s... uh, very nice.” Beatrix smiled again, and even though she knew that this was a hard matter for Steiner, she appreciated his effort. Steiner was an excellent fighter, who could take down warriors, behemoths, monsters, and

power-hungry insane maniacs, but when it came to matters of the heart, he was but a greenhorn.

Luckily, Beatrix also stunk in the romance department, which in fact made them almost right for each other. If fate had been any kinder to them, then they could've already started a wonderful yet slightly strange relationship, but circumstances prevented them from going anywhere. It would've been almost impossible for them to have anything together as long as they dedicated themselves to protecting the throne, and if they both retired from their position, then who would be left to guard the King and Queen?

Fate could be so cruel, though...

"...My apologies," muttered Steiner, fidgeting with his hands. "I... I am not too good at this..." Still fumbling a little, Steiner reached into a sack he had been carrying and pulled out a gift-wrapped box. At first, Beatrix didn't quite know what to make of it, but when Steiner said the next two words, Beatrix gasped with pleasant surprise.

"...Happy birthday!" With her eyes sparkling, Beatrix took the box into her hands and thanked Steiner for remembering that day. She carefully unwrapped the box, and breathlessly gazed at the

gift he had gone through the trouble of giving. On the surface, it looked just like a Rose Brooch made out of rubies and emeralds, but when Beatrix gave it a closer look, a tear fell out of her eye. Her name was engraved on the stem of the brooch—along with two other names, those of the people who had given birth to her.

It was one of the few relics that had survived Ignus' attack.

“Adelbert... where did you find this?” whispered Beatrix. Steiner smiled, as that had been perhaps the first time she called him by his first name.

“Well... it's a rather long story,” he coughed. “Let's just say that I found it while searching around that area. Do you recall the mission that Queen Brahne sent me on, concerning the rampant griffons? Well, we stumbled across the ruins of D'negel during that time, and I somehow found this locked up safe in a box, in near-perfect condition. I... erm..... was hoping to give it to you eventually, but with the war and the invasions... I... umm...” Beatrix smiled warmly, and even though it defied every belief, code, and rule that she followed, she stood up and gave the other knight a tender hug.

“Steiner..... you... ahh... have no idea... how much... this really means to me... Uh... thanks...” Her own face flushed slightly, Beatrix smiled at him again and pinned the family heirloom on her kimono. It matched her outfit perfectly, and would probably look just as good on her military uniform. Now she had three relics to remember those closest to her...

“...It, uh..... is a pleasure, Beatrix,” saluted Steiner. He suddenly grew very serious and a little sad, and sighed wistfully. “It pains me to say it, but I am only vacationing a little. I should probably return to the castle and help their lieges prepare for any future invasions. It’s a disappointment, but I suppose that’s the price we pay to ensure safety to our loved ones.” He paused, and managed another one of those awkward smiles of his. “.....Erm..... I, I shall see you again!” He bowed his head twice, and trotted out of the bar.

“Steiner?” He turned around, and Beatrix gave him one last smile. “Thank you, Steiner—Adelbert. You..... you really do have no idea how much this really means to me, but perhaps one day, I’ll let you know. Good day.”

Little wonder that after that moment, Beatrix finally started to act the way she was supposed to.

Beatrix's mood was already quite inflated thanks to the surprise from Steiner. Not only had the knight been one of the few people that actually remembered her birthday, but he had also given her such a heartwarming gift that it would've made a pair of passionate lovers jealous. The emerald-ruby Rose Brooch was gorgeous enough on its own, but the fact that it had once belonged to her parents made it priceless. Beatrix's heart felt lighter every time it leaped up against the item, and the smile she wore all day made even her fabulous costume seem pale.

Maybe, growing older wasn't so bad after all. And... maybe Beatrix needed to stop worrying so much. There was so much joy and happiness in the world that oftentimes, the knight could easily miss it all. Her duty and her past had deprived her from years of love and happiness, but now that things finally seemed to be calming down, albeit for the third or fourth time, she could really dedicate the rest of her life to absorbing everything life had to offer.

Of course, she still had her duties to perform, and although she was off work today, she would be expected to be in tip-top shape for the next day. Working for the monarchy of Alexandria was an altogether rewarding occupation, though even Beatrix would sometimes yearn for a life to live on her own terms. She both loved and hated her job, but of course she only expressed half of her thoughts out loud. Only a few very close friends truly knew her secrets—but nobody knew them all.

After deliberately parading through most of the town, Beatrix found herself walking towards Freya's small dominion. The house could manage to hold two people, but it was made for one, and since it had been originally built for a Burmecian anyway (some 224 years ago), it suited Freya well. Beatrix knew that her presence inside the house was as inevitable as the next heartbeat, and not just because she was now on very good terms with the dragoon. Freya would most likely not know of Beatrix's birthday, so the knight would have to let her friend know—for future reference, of course!

So, Beatrix strolled towards the small abode, and politely knocked on the door. It was answered a minute later by Freya, who was also wearing ordinary clothes (she had been wearing her

dragoon's uniform less and less, claiming that there was "no need for it outside of decoration or battle"). At first the dragoon drew back in confusion, but after rubbing her furry chin in thought, a spark of recognition came to her lime eyes, and she grinned happily.

"...*Beatrix*?" she squealed. "That can't possibly be you!!" To prove it, the knight smiled haughtily and waved an invisible strand of hair out of her eyes. She then performed her traditional salute, and even stood in her most classical battle-stance. All three trademarks were like identification papers to the trained eye, and Freya laughed out loud as she hugged her friend.

"I can't believe it!!" she sang. "My stiff and formal friend here has actually tried to look normal! She failed miserably, of course..."

"Freya!!"

"...but she looks marvelous all the same!" grinned the other woman. Beatrix rolled her eyes and playfully shoved Freya into her house, making the passage now open for herself in the process. As Freya continued to laugh, Beatrix smiled back, and the two ladies looked at each other. Freya was wearing a beautiful blue poncho over a white

undershirt, with some blue knickers over her legs. She succeeded in looking casual, whereas Beatrix had indeed failed, though it was obvious that the human ended up looking much prettier.

“Seriously,” said Freya, “I rarely ever see you wear anything besides that uniform of yours, and I don’t think I’ve *ever* seen you wear your hair in a tail....You know, it actually makes you look a whole lot better. You should keep it like that!” Beatrix mutely shrugged and made herself at home. The two of them were still relatively new when it came to being friends, but they had bonded so much that they could perform such acts without having the other’s permission. They were indeed true friends, and it was a shame that things didn’t quite work out for them at first.

“...So what brings you to my humble abode?” asked the former Burmecian, pouring Beatrix some weak tea (not that the knight didn’t have enough already, but Freya’s teas were to die for). “Are you just here on a social call, or is it business?”

“Pleasure, my friend,” answered the knight, thanking Freya for the tea. As always, it was delicious. “Mmm... Freya, seriously... you should

give this recipe to Quina. You'd make a fortune off of it!"

"Meh," shrugged the dragoon. "Auntie told me to keep guard over it, but I think I'll give it to my little ones, if I have any. So, what's new?" Beatrix sighed, and grew saddened a little as her friend asked the painful question. *Freya, I like you a lot, but I really wish you hadn't asked that*, she mused....*I... uh, I don't want to talk about it...* But her reluctance failed, and after only a brief period, Beatrix caved and spilled the beans.

"A lot, actually," she mumbled. Her eyes raised up to meet her friend's, and she moaned slightly. "Did you know that last night was the first time I ever got drunk? I passed out from too much alcohol, and woke up feeling like garbage."

"What happened?" whispered Freya, kneeling down so she could look her friend in the eye easier. "Beatrix, is something wrong?"

"No... not really," said the General with a sad chuckle. "I'm just a pathetic, weak little girl who worries too much."

"I already knew that," said Freya gently, placing her hand on Beatrix's cheek. There was no enmity or

even humor in her words—just kindness and love. “Tell me, what’s wrong? Really.” Pausing, Beatrix sighed as her eyes bored into Freya’s, and for no real particular reason, she suddenly threw off her patch.

“...I’m such a worthless fool...” she said with a smile.

“Again, it’s public knowledge,” whispered Freya kindly. “Now please, tell me what’s wrong!”

“Nothing,” sighed Beatrix, covering both naked eyes with her hand. “I... I’ve just been dreading this day. You know... it’s my birthday today.”

“Really?” smiled Freya. She grinned warmly, and patted her friend’s cheek. “Beatrix... you never told me! Now I’m going to feel bad that I didn’t get you anything, or that I didn’t do anything with you!”

“The day’s still young, but that’s not necessary,” muttered the knight. Freya smiled and let Beatrix win the little debate, and resumed her friendly interrogation.

“So is my friend worrying about getting older?”

“Sad to say, but I guess I was,” groaned the knight. “I know, I know... I’m so pathetic. I mean, I’m only twenty-nine for heaven’s sake!” Freya

suddenly laughed out loud in a single, sharp guffaw, but her apology came too late.

“Is that all?!” she grinned. “Little Miss Beatrix is worried about turning thirty?!?! Beatrix, darling, that’s nothing at all! You’re still young! And from the looks of it, and please don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re also very attractive!”

“Thanks,” mumbled Beatrix weakly. “For all your insults, Freya, you really are a true friend. How you ever put up with all these disgusting weaknesses of mine is beyond me.” Freya, who at that moment was pouring over with love, grasped both of her friend’s hands and gave as kind a smile as she knew how.

“Beatrix... I don’t want to get the wrong message across, but I really do like you a lot. You’re more than just a friend to me, and I treasure every moment I’m around you—even those times when we’re off fighting for this country. I don’t think of it as ‘putting up with you’, I think of it as ‘being there for you when you need me’.” Freya gave an uncharacteristic wink, which made Beatrix sigh in amazement.

“.....You truly are something special, my friend,” she admitted. “I only wish..... things had

been different for us. We've already lost so much time... And, even though we're close now, I feel as if we still have a lot of catching-up to do."

"Well, we're both still young," said Freya with a smile. "At least I am. I'm not so sure about you."

"Hey!!!"

"Come on, grandmother!" snickered the dragoon. "Let's see you fight the mean old rat with your cane!"

"I am so going to beat you!!" snarled Beatrix playfully. She threw a fake punch, and the two slapped at each other for a little while before wearing themselves and their poor hands out. Smiles were conveyed, and Beatrix reached forward to give her closest friend in the world a much-needed hug.

"You're so good to me..."

"Only because you deserve it," replied Freya. Beatrix snorted and gave her tail a gentle tug. "Hey! Ouch! Beatrix! For somebody so old, you certainly do act immature!!"

"Hey, watch who you're calling 'old' now," pointed the human. "Master Atma told me to respect my elders, because I might one day be one of them.

And no more snide comments, okay??" Sensing her friend's serious mood, Freya quietly nodded her head.

"Okay. I am sorry, Beatrix. I guess... well... I've never really had a friend quite like you. It's like I have an instant rapport with you. Of course you realize that I was just teasing."

"I couldn't tell," muttered the human, and she received a friendly slap for the comment. "Ow! Okay, I'm sorry too! Truce?"

"Of course," said Freya, and the ladies shook on it. Beatrix suddenly suppressed a yawn, which caused Freya to instinctively check her grandfather clock. 'Oh my,' she muttered. "It certainly got late very fast, eh?" Beatrix shrugged and tossed an invisible strand of hair out of her eyes.

"I guess I didn't notice the time. But you're right, it *is* late, and we really haven't done anything special today. I mean, it *is* my birthday."

"I think we did something special already," whispered Freya with her green eyes sparkling. Beatrix rolled her own eyes and muttered something about how corny that just sounded; Freya laughed out loud.

Upon opening the door, a clap of thunder shattered the skies, and a curtain of rain began dripping down towards the earth. It was so wet outside that even the stray frogs were seeking shelter, and every sane person was in the process of finding shelter. There was no possible way that Beatrix could go back to her quarters now—at least not with the clothes she had on now. Even her military uniform probably wouldn't survive such a downpour, so she had little choice but to close the door, turn around, and ask her friend for a favor.

“...Uh, Freya? If it's not too much trouble, do you think I could stay at your house for the night?”

“Of course!” replied the dragoon. “*Mi casa es su casa!* Make yourself comfortable! I'll just sleep on a cot I have stored away, so you can take my bed.”

“You sure about that?” asked Beatrix. “I mean, it's probably going to be cold.”

“Beatrix, you're forgetting that if I wanted to, I could sleep outdoors and not be affected at all,” sighed the younger woman. “Remember, I used to live in a place that *never* stopped raining, except for once every year. A cot would be a luxury to me, and besides, I'd be a terrible host if I didn't allow my guest to have the finest room. It'll be all right.”

Beatrix paused just long enough to give her friend a sweet smile, and shook her head in amazement.

“...You’re so sweet...”

“Spare me,” groaned the dragoon with a mighty roll of her eyes. ‘Ugh, humans... Next thing you know, you’ll be asking for a goodnight kiss.’ A dreadful pause caused Freya to freeze for awhile, and doubtful green eyes stared at Beatrix. “...You’re not—”

“*Good night, Freya,*” enunciated Beatrix in a slow, sweet, seething voice. The dragoon scoffed a little, saluted at her friend, and sauntered off to retrieve the cot she had hidden somewhere. Her sharp ears could pick up the faint rustling of Beatrix disrobing and letting her hair fall (Freya subtly noted that the eye patch was still on the floor), and soon, the squeak of a bed being laid in. Silence.

Sighing a little to herself, for the day had been long and hard, Freya disrobed a little and placed the cot in a comfortable spot. After whispering a prayer to her deity, she slipped into the makeshift bed and pulled the thin covers over her body. She took a deep breath, and prepared herself for a well-deserved rest. All the worries of the day would just have to wait for tomorrow.

“Freya?” came a voice suddenly. The mouse stirred and moaned.

“What?”

“...If I had really asked you to give me a kiss goodnight, what would you have done?” A pause.

“Probably punch you.” Another pause. Beatrix chuckled.

“Right, right. I’m glad to know that. Good night, Freya.”

“And you, Beatrix. And you.”

Both the light of dawn and the smell of cooking hit Beatrix at the same time, and with a flutter of her eyes, she woke up. Sitting on a chair next to her bedside was Freya, watching her like a furry guardian angel. Beatrix groaned and managed to smile at her friend.

“Morning,” she moaned. Freya said the same thing.

“How did you sleep?”

“Terrible,” moaned the knight. “I had a weird dream. It was about us.”

“Oh?” Freya raised an inquiring eyebrow. “We didn’t do anything weird, did we?”

“I... don’t think so,” replied the human as she groaned and stretched. “...I think we just talked.”

“What about?”

“I can’t remember. You know how some dreams vanish the minute you wake up? Mine was like that.” Freya nodded her head thoughtfully and changed the subject as the smell of morning breakfast hit her nose as well.

“I made a few things for you,” she said, pointing to her small kitchen. “You know I’m not a good cook, so bear with me.” Beatrix smiled in thanks, and as Freya left her bedroom, she sat up and leaned over slightly so that her long hair was tickling her chest.

Whew..... what a night...

It was barely dawn, yet already the people of Alexandria could tell that it was going to be a lovely day. The sun was just now peeking over the cloudy horizon in all its fiery-orange glory, and what

remained of the pre-dawn mist was quickly evaporating in the heat. Birds began twittering in the lush trees, and the chill of dawn gave way to the peaceful warmth of morning. Grass began waving in the breeze as droplets of dew trickled down to the thirsty earth, and all of nature took a yawn as it prepared for another peaceful day.

Inside Alexandria Town, a few early-morning risers were already milling around, most of them setting up shop. Sleepy merchants displayed their delicious wares for the lucky few who had managed to wake with the sun, and for those who would not stir to the morning light, there was plenty of delicious smells to wake up to. Rolls of a dozen different flavors and varieties sent their delicious smell into the air, along with sizzling pieces of ham, frying eggs, fresh fruit, chocolate, coffee beans, and cereals.

There were hardly any children running around town, and if there were any, they were still rubbing their eyes and yawning. It was generally a beautiful day in Alexandria (and every other part of the world), and as a casually-dressed Beatrix and Freya emerged from the house, they were greeted by a beautiful town and warmhearted people. They returned the greeting, and since Beatrix had declared

Freya's breakfast "delicious, but unfulfilling", the two made their way to the nearest restaurant. Freya treated her friend to everything, since she had failed to do so the previous day, and declared that they would probably spend every other hour that day in revelry. After all, Beatrix had grown another year to her life, and as her closest and most-trusted friend, Freya wanted to show the overworked knight a good time.

Meanwhile, another couple was just waking up to the morning light. Zidane and Garnet, each cuddling up in the other's embrace, stirred and moaned happily as morning invaded their room, and the King woke up first. As his eyes opened, he smiled warmly at his beautiful jewel, and carefully ran the tips of his fingers through her long, dark hair. She was absolutely breathtaking, especially in the early hours of the morning when she still slept. She still had a scent of perfume on her, and a faint smile on her face, and Zidane was so reluctant to wake her that all he really wanted to do was stare at her forever.

Of course, Garnet did wake up, and the second she opened her eyes, her husband gave her a kiss. They both smiled as they greeted each other, and hands clasped as morning rolled on.

“Hey, sleeping beauty,” he grinned. Garnet winked at him.

“Morning. Did you sleep well?”

“You know it,” he told her in his usual slick manner. “I had a sweet dream about a beautiful angel, but it looks like my dream just became a reality.”

“Stop it!” she sang, slapping his shoulders gently. “That has to be the corniest line...”

“Aw, you know you like it,” he smiled. Garnet sighed and laid a dozen kisses on his mouth and face.

“.....Of course,” she sighed. “But (kiss) really, darling... (kiss) Must you (kiss) always (kiss) wake (kiss) me up (kiss) like that (kiss)?”

“Yeah.....” Smiling lewdly, Zidane snuggled closer and whispered in her ear. “(So... are you up for a little early-morning lovemaking?)”

“Ugh, no,” she groaned. “You wiped me out last night. I think the people in Esto Gaza could hear me screaming...” Zidane chuckled playfully and pressed his nose against the nose of his wife.

“Thank the Creator for soundproof walls, eh?” Garnet giggled and rubbed her nose against his, but grew a little serious a few seconds later.

“Darling, we don’t have soundproof walls.” A chilling pause.

“...We don’t?”

“No.” Another icy pause. Zidane’s eyes darted around wildly, then locked onto his wife’s again. He shrugged, and the two of them burst out in laughter. It would be their misfortune to finally have to get up out of bed, and to walk the halls of Alexandria Castle after what had transpired the previous night..... Well, the soldiers’ faces were definitely redder than usual, but luckily, good old Steiner had slept through all the “noises”.

Like the female knights before them, Zidane and Garnet woke up to a beautiful town and a beautiful morning. They were indeed facing red-faced guards as they left the royal bedroom, but it seemed as if Zidane’s display of public affections saved them. The King openly expressed his feelings to his wife, and she was almost always bashful about it, but then again, they *were* still technically newlyweds, so all their actions could be excused. Besides, they had not been *that* “active” last night.

And for the record, they were enjoying a well-earned moment of privacy on the highest balcony of the castle. This was but one of two secret places that people could go when the pressures of the world had built up too much. All of Alexandria—in fact, all of the Mist Continent was displayed out before them, and even though the morning hour was no longer very early, there was still enough natural mist floating around to make the world seem beautiful and serene.

“Just like you!” grinned Zidane as Garnet complimented nature’s glory. She grinned back and pushed him gently.

“Zidane, please!” she sang. The Genome laughed and grabbed her in a fierce but soft hold, and hoisted the squealing Queen right off the ground. Normally, if Garnet was shrieking like she was now, there’d be a dozen soldiers stationed around, but since they knew Zidane was with her, they just shrugged it off as youthful playfulness.

And so, the citizens of Alexandria woke up from their rest, and prepared to face a peaceful and seemingly-uneventful day.....

However...

Two travelers came to Alexandria sometime before the morning was over, with a third close behind them. The first two had been to the famous town many times for many different occasions, but even now the guards were stubborn about letting them in. The tallest did indeed show his disgust, and once again gave the two soldiers an ultimatum. Once again, the guards quivered in their boots, and once again they refused the three travelers entry. Not even the eldest of the three could get them inside, and he had a talent for slipping into well-guarded places.

But it was the third traveler who was able to part the guards. Unlike her two “companions”, this third person was not only shorter but also a completely different gender. She had a peaceful but haunting aura to her, with just a slight trace of foreboding and misery. The girl was very pretty but rarely smiled, and when she stepped towards the guards, she did not need to speak at all to get them to separate.

“Hey, what’s going on?” grumbled the eldest in his thick accent. “These Alexandrian guards aren’t the type who’ll let just anybody pass.” Quietly, the girl turned around to face the older one, but kept her silence as she stared at him. He finally let out a defeated sigh and shrugged.

“Whatever...” The girl nodded her head, and allowed the two others to lead the way inside. She could not go before them because she had been inflicted with blindness at birth. Dark glasses covered her dead eyes, and aside from the beautifully haunting feel that she carried, the girl was also wearing a long-sleeved snowy-white blouse, with a long rosy-red skirt over her legs and brownish dress shoes on her feet. Her hair was just long enough to reach her armpits, and it was such a gorgeous golden color that it might’ve been honey. In her hand was a walking stick, but she didn’t use it since she was being led by her two companions.

As the three of them came into Alexandria town, the tallest one of the three turned to face the girl and growled.

“You’d better be right about this, that’s all I can say.” He got nothing in reply, so they just kept on walking into town until they caught the eyes of Beatrix and Freya. The two knights were sitting outside as they shared a breakfast roll, and were about midway into it when they noticed the trio of travelers.

“Odd,” said Freya, breaking the silence between them. “I wonder what Amarant is doing here.”

Beatrix turned around to see, and sure enough, it was the wandering mercenary Amarant Coral, and he was traveling with his former mentor, the Hunter, as well.

“I haven’t a clue,” replied the knight as she twisted her body around to get a better look. “But if it’s anything like the last few times, I’m sure that there’s some trouble in the world.” Freya hummed softly to herself.

“You may be right,” she mumbled. “Come. We had better check this out.” The two knights stood up out of their seat and gave the rest of their roll to some children before following the suspicious people. Amarant was becoming a rather common visitor to the kingdom, but as Beatrix said, every time he came, something bad was usually afoot. After the war with Kuja, he had first arrived to tell of the attack on Mognet Central, then apparently stuck around to fight off the Foe’s attack. He slipped into obscurity after that, but came back just in time to warn the kingdom about Kyahar Ignus.

It then seemed logical for the ladies to be suspicious, for not only did Amarant’s presence most likely portend to a new threat on the world, but every time he was in the area, the enemies grew

worse and the battles became longer and harder. Something suspicious was indeed on the horizon, and the two knights intended to find out what exactly it was.

But..... who's that third person with them?

As Amarant, the Hunter, and the mysterious third person weaved their way through town, they did not stir up the usual commotion that always seemed to sprout up whenever they were in the area. True, it was still a reasonably early hour, but there would've been *some* kind of commotion by now. Freya didn't know whether the silence or Amarant was more suspicious, nor did she know why most of the guards parted as the three of them waded through town. Alexandrian guards were not perfect, but they were very efficient, and completely loyal to the throne. They wouldn't just let these three characters go without *some* investigation, but as it stood, they parted their swords without so much as a "Halt!".

"That's strange," noted Beatrix as she observed the goings-on. "I wonder why those guards are letting them pass." Freya nodded her head and rubbed her chin in thought.

"Curiouser and curiouser..." The two knights continued to follow Amarant's convoy as they made

their way to the castle, where even the ferrywoman allowed them passage without hassle. Beatrix cursed mildly as the boat sailed away with the trio on board, but unless she wanted to swim the distance, she would have to wait for it to come all the way back to her side of the shore before she could board it.

Meanwhile, more strange things were going on as Amarant, the Hunter, and the girl came to the castle gates. The guards here were perhaps the best in the whole kingdom, and had explicit instructions to not allow anyone past unless they had business inside the castle. Amarant could make all the threats he wanted, the Hunter could coerce them as much as he liked, but there was little chance aside from using brute force for either of them to get inside.

Strangely enough, the golden-haired girl parted them with a mere wave of her hand. Even stranger was the fact that not only did the guards fail to recognize her, but she had never been in the kingdom before, and didn't know anybody there either. These guards had their orders from the King and Queen themselves, and yet here they were, lowering their weapons without even a conflict...

A similar spectacle awaited the trio every time they encountered a nosy guard. Sometimes, Amarant or the Hunter would be able to persuade them to leave, but most of the work was caused by the girl. She appeared to not have any magical abilities at all, yet with a simple wave of her hand, or perhaps a dead gaze from behind those dark glasses, and the guards carefully stepped aside and let them through. They continued on, further into the castle, until they were but a few steps away from where Zidane and Garnet were.

The monarchs were just now getting down to the business of tightening their defenses for any future invasions, when the door opened and the trio calmly walked inside. Immediately, Steiner leaped forward and grabbed the hilt of his sword, and demanded to know what the meaning of the intrusion was.

“Halt! How dare you come into their majesties’ quarters without proper authority!” Amarant and the Hunter both growled and crossed their arms in an equally-surly manner, and left the tin woodsman to the girl. Before Steiner could unsheathe his sword, she quietly approached him and placed a gentle hand on his arm. The desire to bully the two men around suddenly left him, and Steiner’s face became placid as the girl looked into his face. Quietly, the armored

man sheathed his weapon, and stepped aside dumbly. It was almost as if he were in a trance, and didn't quite know what he was doing—but no harm came to him, as the three of them were there in the kingdom on a mission of peace—and impending doom.

“.....Uh, hi,” managed Zidane in his usual manner. “Uh, what brings you guys to Alexandria?”

“This girl here,” pointed the Hunter, indicating the quiet blonde. Zidane smiled and waved at her.

“Oh, hey. I'm King Zidane T. Alexandros, and this is my wife, Queen Garnet....Uh... well, uh, I guess..... Uhh, welcome to Alexandria.” Amarant groaned in frustration as he shook his head, and the tall man nearly covered his face in shame before talking to his one-time ally.

“Ugh, idiot! Why do you always do that?”

“I guess it's just my nature,” smiled the King. “So, milady, what can I do for you?”

“Yes, tell us all what this is about,” insisted the Hunter. The girl quietly turned around to nod at the woodsman, but before she could speak (*if* she could speak), she was interrupted by the door bursting open again. Beatrix and Freya rushed inside, nearly

bowling over the two men, and demanded to know what was going on.

“Highness!!”

“Stop right there!!”

“What is the meaning of this?!”

“Talk!!”

“Looks like this has become quite a gathering,” muttered the Hunter wryly. He smiled unhappily and indicated that Steiner was now free to join everyone else, and the knight slowly joined his fellow warriors, a confused look on his face the whole time.

“Beatrix!” he hissed. “What in all the worlds is going on?!”

“I guess we’ll find out,” she replied. Soon, everyone’s focus was turned towards Amarant and the Hunter, but they insisted innocence.

“No, not us,” said the elder. “We haven’t a clue as to what’s going on either. We were just hunting down this girl here and she told us something about how Alexandria would be in danger.”

“Hey, hold on a second!” exclaimed the King. “...First of all, are you saying that *this* was the girl

that had the bounty on her head?”

“Yup.” Zidane grinned joylessly and peered closer at the silent lady.

“...She doesn’t look dangerous,” he noted. The girl stiffly tilted her head to the side, but kept her silence. “Hey, sorry milady. I’m still not used to being King.”

“Got that right...”

“*Anyway!*” shouted Freya, drawing everyone else’s attention. After a pause, she nodded to the Hunter. “Explain yourself.”

“Like I said, even I don’t know that much,” he replied. “We found the girl all right, but she told us that we didn’t know what we were doing, or somethin’. She then told us that there was gonna be some evil power that would invade Alexandria, ‘in the near future’, or so she said. Anyway, we didn’t believe her, but let’s just say that she made us an offer that we really couldn’t refuse.” A pause.

“Huh?”

“She told us that she’d turn herself in if she couldn’t find proof of an invasion,” explained

Amarant. "...And if she *could*, then we'd have to give our services to you, or some crap."

"Ohhhhh....." A wave of clarity soon took over everyone in the room as the situation became a little more understandable. Beatrix bitterly noted that her premonition had been correct, but kept all other personal thoughts to herself.

"So, Miss..... Ahh, what is your name?"

"She wouldn't tell us," sniffed Amarant. "We just called her whatever we wanted. You could do the same." Another pause.

"Very well. Miss, would you be so kind as to tell us what this matter is all about?" The blind girl quietly nodded her head, and approached the throne with her stick rapping up against the floor. She reached into her blouse pocket and pulled out a small sheet of paper, then gave it to Zidane and blindly walked back to where she had been. The King shrugged as he opened the letter, and read the only word that was written on it:

"'Iudicium'. Hey, I don't get it."

"*Did you just say what I think you said?!?!?!'*" All eyes turned towards Amarant, but what they saw would fill anyone with shock. The normally-

apathetic and stoic loner was now hunched over in sheer horror. His whole body quivered from some unknown fear, and his hidden eyes had bulged to the point of being visible once again. Perspiration drowned his face, and his mouth hung open in horrified amazement.

“Whoa, what’s gotten into you?” whispered Zidane. “Amarant, I’ve never seen you look so..... scared!”

“Me neither, and I’ve known you for years!” grumbled the Hunter. “What’s gotten into ya?” Amarant remained frozen as more and more people asked questions, but remained silent through most of their interrogation.

“...No,” he moaned, holding his head with his large hands. “...No..... It... it just isn’t possible..... Iudicium...”

“Who’s that?” asked Beatrix. Amarant gave her one single piercing look before speaking.

“Trust me,” he shivered, “it’s best if you didn’t know...”

All this time, the mysterious golden-haired girl remained as still and silent as ever...

To be continued...

9. Apocalypse

Part Nine: Apocalypse

Technically, it was still a peaceful time in Alexandria, and probably the rest of the world as well. After all, there were no wars or natural disasters to worry about, and nobody was suffering greatly, either. But there was so much going on in this large and fair kingdom alone that peace was but a joke. It seemed as if everybody was busy, whether they were preparing for something or else attending to someone—and the people who had the latter job were probably the most beleaguered.

In reality, there were really only four major things going on at the moment, but they all had the same connection. First of all, there was the business of a possible future invasion to worry about. Ever since Alexandria had suffered through the attack from Kyahar Ignus, it had been on high alert for another assault. The kingdom had been prepared for this most recent invasion, and got through it with almost no suffering (despite how tyrannical their enemy had been). With such overall positive results, with a little common sense thrown in for good measure, the

brunt of everyone's workday was spent beefing up the kingdom's defenses.

The second matter was actually better divided up into three smaller ones (though anyone with enough brains in their head would've classified all of these issues as major). Initially, there was the introduction of the name Iudicium to consider. It seemed as if a certain redheaded messenger and his sensitive mentor were about the only ones around who really knew that name, though in the future, there would not be a man or a woman alive who would ever forget. Said messenger, a semi-reliable mercenary named Amarant Coral, would not divulge too much information about this strange name, which led up to the next issue.

Third, Amarant's own loyalty was now in question, but more so than usual. Previously, the masterless wanderer had zigzagged between both sides of the law, but he always served himself over everything else. He had been a bouncer for Treno, a hired assassin for Brahne, a traveling companion for Zidane and Garnet, a messenger for Cid Falbool, and everything else in between—but he could also be considered a traitor. It was not natural for one man to have so much information about so many enemy forces, and as statistics showed, every time Amarant

had visited Alexandria (after the fight with Kuja), it always seemed as if he bore bad news with him. He had warned the kingdom about Mognet Central, as well as Ignus, and a few other uprisings here and there, so of course everyone was more suspicious of him than usual.

The fourth matter was perhaps strangest of them all. Zidane never recalled Amarant having a friend, with the possible exception of Lani, and the tall drifter was a stickler for working alone (with few exceptions), so the question as to why he was wandering around with a young lady was a mysterious one. This young lady certainly seemed normal, except she was blind, yet Amarant and his mentor had apparently gone out of their way to bring her there. Zidane could've sworn that the two had been out hunting for her, yet there she was, a bounty uncollected on her head. Why they felt the need to bring her on their most recent trip to the kingdom was unknown; the young lady hadn't spoken yet, and she hardly even moved.

It would've taken years to completely figure out all these problems, but unfortunately for Zidane and Garnet, they didn't exactly have all that precious time to waste. Apparently, there was yet another invasion afoot.

The time—A few hours after the arrival of Amarant, the Hunter, and the mysterious girl.

The place—Alexandria Kingdom.

The players—Queen Garnet, co-ruler of the kingdom, and a silent young lady who had yet to be identified.

The status—Uncertainty.

Beatrix and Steiner had been given the oh-so important task of organizing troops and bolstering defenses, along with every other major commanding officer in the kingdom. Freya, who had recently been added to the growing list of Royal Guards, was with them as they tried to beef up the kingdom's security. It was unknown how much time they had before the forces of darkness would arrive, so all the soldiers of the castle had already went through their training.

Bosh, Gash, and Mash, Garnet's oldest and most trusted strategists, were forever busy conceiving every possible plan that the enemy would make. When questioned about the person known only as Iudicium, they had very little to say except that the whole kingdom should be prepared. Garnet had a feeling that these three old men knew who this new

threat was, but were not giving anything away out of some strange, unknown fear. They had seen lots of trouble and turmoil in their years, and to see the trio worry was most unsettling.

Eiko, the Vivi army, Quina, Quban, and Mikoto did what they could to help around, but most of the time they were free to wander around and socialize with the locals. Eiko, who had been carrying a big load of responsibility ever since she became the representative of Madain Sari, was now taking some much-needed time off, along with the Vivis, who deserved vacation time themselves. Mikoto tried to squeeze in some time with Zidane, but her “brother” was almost always busy with one thing or another, so she ended up working alongside Freya and the other knights. The Qus, needless to say, were both busy making piece’a for everyone.

Amarant and his mentor, a man only known as the Hunter, were under close scrutiny by anyone who was not too busy with their work. As of that very moment, almost nobody trusted the two of them, especially the elder man, since his record was even foggier than Amarant’s. At least a few people had been around the taller man long enough to know a bit about him, but *nobody* knew much about the Hunter, except for Zidane.

Zidane himself held the bulk of responsibility in his young arms, and while everyone else was busy with one thing or another, Garnet decided to visit the mysterious young girl that Amarant and the Hunter had brought with them. The Queen had a lot of questions on her mind, and it seemed as if even the two wanderers would do little to help clear her mind. It was the girl that drew her the most—a girl who seemed no younger than Garnet herself.

While most everybody was preparing for the inevitable, Queen Garnet managed to find some time to spend with the unidentified blind young woman that had been brought in recently. The girl was sitting outside at a table, staring emptily at the large castle before her. She had been given a cup of warm tea by a servant, but by the time Garnet came around to visit, the drink was perhaps too cold to drink. The Queen of Alexandria noticed that this young girl was clasping a finely-made walking stick in her hands, and was actually very pretty, but she had never smiled since arriving. A definite look of concern and worry was on her face, even though at first glance her emotions were unreadable.

“...Hello,” said Garnet as she approached the girl. She didn’t even move. “...Well, as confusing as the past few hours have been, it is nice to find some

time to relax, yes?” The girl only nodded her head, resulting in a sigh coming from the Queen’s mouth.

“Listen,” she said, ‘I have a lot of questions that I want to ask you, but I can’t very well learn anything if you can’t talk. Now, I’m assuming that you can hear me but you can’t see me, correct?’ A nod of the head. “Good. And you can—”

“Excuse me, highness...” At that moment, a soldier had came by to deliver a message to the Queen. Garnet paid a little bit of attention to the soldier as she listened to what she had to say, and dismissed the woman with a wave, and later, a sigh.

“It seems we’re having problems,” she muttered. “Young lady, please forgive the interruption, as there are some things I just cannot prevent. Now, where were we?” A pause. The girl fidgeted in her seat a little, casting her face towards her cup.

“I don’t mean to be a problem,” she whispered.

“Hm?”

“I don’t mean to be a problem,” she said again. Garnet’s face grew gentle as the girl spoke for the first time since arriving, and she even let out a smile.

“No, dear, you’re not a problem.”

“That’s not how I see things,” replied the girl—using an odd choice of words in the process. “From what I know, all of this trouble seemed to start up once I came here. Think about it—the maddening increase of the castle’s defenses, the rushed training sessions, the strategists coming up with plans... It’s been chaos ever since I came.”

“And you think it’s all because of you?” whispered Garnet in extreme disbelief. The girl shrugged. “No, dear, not at all! It’s just a coincidence, really! I... we... that is, uh... Alexandria has suffered greatly in the past two years, what with all these wars and invasions we’ve been having, so I guess our suspicion is justified. But rest assured, miss, none of these issues are due to your appearance.” This assurance did little to ease the young girl’s worry, though she did look a fraction better.

“.....I see...” The young woman then took her tea and finally began to drink it, as if Garnet’s audience had been the ignition she needed to start talking and moving. But sadly, after the teacup was empty, the young woman returned to her motionless and emotionless state. Garnet swallowed a bit of her own drink before prodding further into the lady’s mind.

“...So... explain to me,” she began. “How is it that you came here with Amarant? I heard that he was hunting a young lady down. Could that be you?”

“It was,” replied the blonde girl. “Yes, it seems as if there was a bounty unjustly placed on my head, and Mr. Coral and Mr. Hunter were after me. I even think I know why.”

“And why’s that?” A pause.

“...Forgive me for saying this, but it’s not really your concern,” said the girl with a wave of her hand. “Let’s just say that... well, it was quite a misinterpreted message they received. In any case, I managed to convince them to take me here, and... well, you know the rest.”

“Indeed...” muttered Garnet emptily. The Queen finished off her drink, and decided to interview the young lady a little more. “Well, I would really like to get to know you better. There’s something... peculiar about you, something that I have not seen in any other human I met. Oh, it’s nothing derogatory! Actually, I’m sensing a kind of... gentleness about you, and a spirit that defies my own broad imagination. There’s definitely something special

about you, something that..... well, I can't quite explain it."

"You may soon find your answers," replied the girl enigmatically. "For now, though, I'll keep my identity a secret. Just consider me a friend."

"And your name?" The girl paused just long enough to pour herself some tea.

"Sorry... I trust you, but I can never be too careful. There *are* people after me, people who won't listen to reason like Mr. Coral and Mr. Hunter did, and I'm sorry to say that I cannot even reveal my name. But, if you must call me anything, just call me Milady."

"All right," agreed Garnet. "So... would you be inclined to answer any more questions of mine?"

"I suppose," said the girl gently. Her voice was a gentle one, like Garnet's, but it had just a sliver of an edge to it. It was a small fraction deeper than the Queen's, though not as deep as Beatrix's, and the accent was indefinable. It was a very soft voice, the kind that usually suggested comfort, though now it was filled with anxiety and a deep uncertainty. She was indeed mysterious, and had Garnet owned the day's hours all to herself, she would've cleared up

such an enigma. Sadly, the Queen only got a few more questions by before she was pulled back into her work.

“I regret leaving you,” she said as she stood. “I feel like..... like I can really trust you. I don’t know how else to describe it, but something tells me that I’m going to benefit from having you around.”

“Yes,” replied the girl suddenly, “you will. I can assure you, Highness, you will most definitely benefit from having me around.” A pause.

“What to you mean?”

“Huh? Oh! Ahhh...” The young lady actually cracked a smile, blushed just faintly, and waved an embarrassed hand at the Queen. “Oh, haha, it’s nothing, really... I just have a bad habit of rambling sometimes. It’s really nothing, really!!” The Queen gazed back at the flustered young woman with a good dose of confusion on her face, but she decided to prod no further and shrugged.

“All right. I suppose you might be correct, in that you could be helpful. I have work to do, Milady, but please feel free to explore our kingdom and acquaint yourself with the locals. I am only disappointed that

you must see Alexandria in such a wretched condition.”

“It’s okay,” assured the blonde. “I’ve been through worse than this. Believe me you, Highness, I have *definitely* seen worse. Oh, and Highness?”

“Yes?” The girl slowly stood up, performed a curtsy, and gave the Queen her best smile.

“Thank you for speaking with me. I hardly ever get the chance to hold a meaningful conversation with another person. I’m usually a reclusive type, not by choice, so you really made my day.”

“Well, thank you!” sang Garnet cheerfully. With her face still beaming, the Queen performed a curtsy of her own, and excused herself so she could attend to the day’s duties. She was unable to hear the last sentiment from her blind guest.

“Sarah... please, be careful in the future. I sense great danger is about to fall upon this kingdom, and most of it, I fear, shall be directed upon you...”

In a room covered with darkness, there sat a man on a throne drenched with gold and splashed with the blood of those who had cried out for a savior,

and found none. On his finger was a ring made out of brass, and on his wrist was an armband made out of copper. He wore a suit made of the purest white material, and on one side of the throne rested an ever-eternal pair of measuring scales. The man had dark raven hair, and narrow black eyes, and an aura hovering through him that no other man has.

A person approaches the throne, and kneels down on both knees. The man sitting on the throne waits, then bids the kneeler to stand.

“Your report?” he asks, even though he does not have to. The man who had kneeled swallows and stammers a little.

“Y-yes, Lord. Yes... We, ah... well...”

“What... is your... report?” asked the seated man again, this time emphasizing all his words. The stuttering man swallowed and muttered out the news.

“...A... a complete defeat, milord. I... I alone survived, I believe, but there might be others.”

“Then it was not a complete defeat,” said the seated man in a calm, objective voice. “A survivor or two means that there was still a chance.”

“But milord! Not only were we outnumbered and outclassed, but I do believe that they had knowledge of our attack!!”

“And how do you suppose that happened?” said the man—although it was more of a demand than a question. The stammering person paused, reluctant to share his dreaded news.

“I... I have no idea...”

“Exactly what I had been thinking,” sighed the seated man. “Tell me, soldier—what of my... more barbaric ally?” A thick, long pause hovered in the air.

“Dead,” moaned the soldier. “Killed..... Ran through, by two knights...”

“I see...” It was noticeable that never once did this seated man ever allow much of a pause in-between his words and his servant’s words. It was almost as if he had anticipated every response, or else he had been so fast and smart that he could think up of everything well beforehand. In any case, this left the lesser man to forcibly tell his master everything else.

“...Milord? Your orders?”

“First, you shall be tried for cowardice,” muttered the superior man, half of his thoughts still wandering around his defeated accomplice. The lesser man, however, was not quite so calm.

“But... but milord! I... I came all this way to tell you news of the recent attack!”

“And a fine job you did, soldier,” agreed the superior. “But... surely you must also know the punishments that accompany cowards. Do you know what I do to cowards, soldier?”

“.....I—”

“I feed cowards to my dogs, soldier. Usually they are alive when they receive their punishment. Do you want to be fed to my dogs, soldier?”

“NO!!!” screamed the frightened soldier. “No, please!! Anything but that! PLEASE!!!!”

“You should have thought of that before you turned tail and ran,” muttered the superior man quietly. It sounded like he had dealt with turncoats and cowards... before. “You know, soldier, I would not be who I am if I did not live up to my name.”

“But... please!!!” begged the soldier. “Please reconsider, master! PLEASE!!!!” For the first time

since the conversation started, there was a break in speeches, and it was plain that the soldier actually thought his master was considering things. But no—the dark-haired man merely stood out of his throne drenched in gold and blood, clapped his hands twice, and proclaimed Judgment.

“And may Justice be swift in her retribution...” he whispered. The frightened soldier stammered and screamed, and the very last thing he heard was the sound of half a dozen starving mongrels ripping at his living flesh. He only screamed one more thing before being silenced forever.

“Please...!!! Master Iudicium...! Have mercy!!!!!!!” But the dark-haired man, still standing straight and tall, folded his hands behind his back and watched as his soldier became food for dogs. He barely even moved, except to pick some lint off his clothes.

“Mercy...” muttered the man, “...and Justice... These are... two very, very different concepts. Mercy and Justice... ah yes, perhaps they are even enemies.” The dark-haired man then let a smile crease his stoic face, and let his dogs carry off whatever they wished as he dismissed them. He then

turned towards the emptiness of space, and spoke one final phrase.

“The blood of my family, the blood of the Iudicium clan, shall indeed be avenged; aye, it shall be washed away by the blood of those that dare destroy such a legacy. Beware, Alexandria, for your eradication draws close.”

Suddenly, a golden-haired girl snapped out of her nightmare, her breath heaving in great gasps and her entire face drenched in her own perspiration. She slowly sat up, still heaving terribly, and let out a shuddering sigh as she realized that she was back in the world of lights—in theory. The dawn was still a few hours away—the chiming grandfather clock rang five times just after she woke—but indeed, the young woman was awake, and freed from her nightmares.

For now.

They had been a nightly occurrence for many a week now; indeed, perhaps they had been invading her sleep even before the figures in the dream knew of their own doings. Every dream more or less ended with the dark-haired man declaring vengeance for a crime unknown, and every dream allowed the blonde to share in the brief torture of the poor

cowardly soldier. His screams became her screams, his convulsions became hers, and the sweat on her brow would have certainly blinded her—that is, if she wasn't already.

With her dead eyes forever useless, the young girl covered them with her hand, and took several deep breaths. She had a lot of thinking to do, and she would never be able to do anything in her distressed state. Nobody in this realm she was in knew of the oncoming attack, except for herself, and this knowledge alone was devouring away at the girl's frail spirit. Yet for all her inner troubles, this young blind blonde could never tell of such horrors, for though this kingdom desperately needed to know what was coming, the future was indeed uncertain and pliable.

Yet... at least now they had some type of warning. One word—*Iudicium*—had been enough to stir them all into a sudden frenzy. Almost everybody was busy preparing the kingdom for the most dreadful invasion she would receive, and although even this might not have been enough, it was something at least.

And so, feeling the desire to sleep vanishing from her, thanks to her nightly vision, the golden-haired

girl slipped out of the bed she had been given, and decided to go on a thoughtful walk to clear her head. As terrible as her vision had been, there was really nothing she could do unless she was in top condition, mentally and physically. And physically, the girl was very hungry.

The mood in Alexandria now was one of massive uncertainty. Gone were the squealing children, the carefree citizens, and the happy merchants. Now, it was as if the city were occupied by an unknown enemy—yet this enigmatic force hardly had no name. It was known as dread and uncertainty, and although it was not as terrible as a garrison of enemy soldiers milling around, the mere psychological and social damage it did was perhaps worse. Even Zidane rarely smiled, but for good reason. He was, after all, the joint ruler of this kingdom, and he of all people had a right to worry.

Ever since Mognet Central had been attacked, Alexandria had more or less been on its toes. The kingdom had suffered in the past, from more than one enemy, and according to the sketchy but serious information brought by Amarant and the Hunter, it would definitely face hard times in the future—perhaps worse than all the previous attacks combined. Personally, Garnet couldn't even begin to

imagine a force any worse than Kuja or Garland, but there was always a possibility.

“It’s Murphy’s Law,” pointed the Hunter to a gathering of citizens. “If something has the possibility of going wrong, then it will. Take it from me; I’ve been in these kinds of situations before. It’s not all wine and roses.”

“You can’t always have such a pessimistic attitude!” stated Eiko in rebuttal. “Look on the bright side! Maybe we’re just doing all this for nothing! Maybe there IS no enemy!”

“HA!!!” snarled the Hunter. “Get real, kid!!! No enemies??! Absurd! If I say there’s gonna be an attack, then there’s *gonna* be an attack! I don’t have these powerful senses for nothing, ya know!”

“Humph!” snorted the child. “Well, *I’m* going to look on the bright side!”

“You just keep living in that fantasy world of yours, kid,” muttered the Hunter with a sarcastic wave. “If I were you, and I thank God I’m not, I would be either preparing myself for the Apocalypse, or else running away as fast as my feet could carry me. I don’t suppose there are many

cowards in this kingdom, so I guess we're just gonna have to fight."

"It *is* a possibility," agreed Mikoto as she placed her hand on Eiko's shoulder. "I question the validity of these claims just as much as everyone else does, but would you not agree that it'd be better to be safe than sorry?"

"...Well..." Eiko couldn't give a solid response to that question even if she tried, so the little summoner grudgingly nodded her head and agreed with the female Genome. The two ladies, along with a few other volunteers, had the slightly difficult task of watching over the two mercenaries, making sure that neither one of them did anything suspicious. As Mikoto had stated, nearly everyone in Alexandria suspected Amarant of foul play, for who on all of Gaia could ever possess so much information about so many nasty occurrences?

It was true that a few of these might have come from Mognet Central (except for the very earliest), and maybe this most recent one had come from the unidentified blonde girl who came in with Amarant a few days earlier, but surely not *every single* bit of news came from the Moogles or the girl. Something was amiss, and until there came proof saying

otherwise, Amarant and his dark-haired mentor were to be considered guilty until proven innocent.

Garnet, who was transfixed on the blue skies above her, suddenly spotted an extremely familiar-looking airship in the distance. The mere sight of such a vessel was so unbelievable that she actually rubbed her eyes in disbelief, yet for all her doubts, nothing could disprove the flying machine. She even called her husband to affirm the presence of the vessel, and he too had to rub his eyes in order to fully believe.

“Tell me I’m not crazy!” said the Queen. “Tell me that’s really the *Prima Vista* up there!”

“Either that, or a *really* good facsimile!” exclaimed Zidane in amazement. “Jeez Louise, Boss must’ve asked Cid to make a new model, cuz’ the old one crashed and burned around Evil Forest!” Garnet nodded her head and was helpless to do anything except watch the familiar airship land just outside of Alexandria’s border. The guards standing by the gate were suspicious of the craft, for they had received no conformation of such a vehicle ever coming within the border, yet friends of the people on board the airship assured the guards that everything was okay.

Zidane, Garnet, Beatrix, Freya—literally everybody came out to greet their new guests, even Amarant, the Hunter (along with their squad of “guardians”) and the unidentified young girl. The crowd waiting outside the vessel, which was so much like the old *Prima Vista* that even Zidane couldn’t tell the difference, were a group of people who pretty much knew who was going to emerge from such a ship. Sure enough, to nobody’s surprise, every last member of Tantalus came out and waved at the crowd, including the newest member, Lani.

“Hey! Boss!!” exclaimed Zidane. The loveable Genome nearly tackled the furry man in a hug, but Baku warding him off with a wave of his paw.

“Hey, runt! You don’t need to be callin’ me Boss now that yer a King!” Zidane grinned at the large man anyway, and performed his same usual Tantalus greeting along with Blank, Marcus, Cinna, Ruby—and Lani.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve seen any of you!” leered the dark-skinned girl. “I’ve almost missed seeing you! Oh, hey red! I guess you wanna know why we’re here, eh?”

“Not really,” muttered Amarant as he crossed his arms. Lani sneered at her one-time partner and gave

him an unenthusiastic wave.

“Hmph... well, anyway, I guess we should tell you why we’re here...”

“No rush!” assured Quina. “Stay for a while! Eat much food, yes-yes?”

“Gwahahahaha!! Sounds like a good idea!” bellowed Baku. “Hey, Lani!!”

“Yeah, Boss?”

“Why don’t’cha stop jabberin’ to everybody and pick up yer skirts? This Qu here is treatin’ us all to a fine meal, and I *know* I taught you better than to skip a free meal!!”

“(You didn’t teach me anything, you big fat tub of hairy lard...)” muttered the former bounty hunter. Baku leaned forward annoyingly and placed his paw on his ear.

“Eh? What’s that?”

“I *said* nothing, okay!!” spat Lani. “Now if you don’t mind.....” The loudmouthed and narcissistic bounty hunter smiled impishly and grabbed hold of poor Blank’s arm, which was unfortunately attached to poor Blank. He gave Zidane a look of silent dread as the redheaded woman led him away, and

everyone else more or less suppressed a laugh. Freya, who was one of the few people there with almost no ties to Tantalus, merely hid a faint smile.

“...I see... they are in good spirits as always...”

“Good spirits,” muttered Steiner. “That is a..... delicate way to put things!” The ironclad knight marched his way towards the biggest dining room that Alexandria boasted, with everyone else that had assembled following him. Zidane and Garnet remained behind with Baku, along with Amarant and the Hunter.

“It certainly has been awhile, eh Baku?” said the oldest mercenary among them. Baku swallowed and performed a bow that Zidane never thought he had in him.

“...Ehh... sure has, Boss! Hey, does... uh... Zidane know about you an’ me?”

“I guess so,” shrugged the Hunter. “He’s not the brightest fire out there, but he’s definitely one of the hottest. He’ll definitely go down in history as the first member of Tantalus to be crowned a King.”

“Gwahahahaha! Definitely!!” Baku’s belly rolled as he laughed, and the large catlike man strolled on ahead with his mentor more or less bringing up the

rear. Amarant, who stayed behind as per normal, gave the young King an empty glance in an attempt to answer his questions.

“That old man’s been around some,” he said. “He definitely knows his stuff....Hey, you didn’t hear this from me, but he’s probably the only guy out there I really feel comfortable teaming up with.”

“What about your former girlfriend?” grinned the foolish King. Amarant snarled just faintly.

“Who, Lani? She’s too loud. I couldn’t sneak up on a deaf sloth with her around. Well, I’m not one to pass up a free meal, so... see ya.” And with his usual salute, Amarant left Zidane and Garnet to wonder.

“Strange,” said the Queen with a shrug. Zidane, as usual, gave her his most proud smirk.

“Eh, it happened to me all the time when I was with Boss and the others. Course’, I never knew about Amarant until we met in Madain Sari, and I had no idea that that Hunter guy was Boss’ Boss until recently. So.....” The Genome King trailed off for awhile, then decided that it was best if he, too got something to eat.

During the meal, which thankfully did not consist of piece'a, most of the conversation hovered around how Tantalus had been faring since their last appearance in the kingdom (which would have been Zidane and Garnet's wedding). Baku had not recruited anybody major ever since Lani showed up, although dozens of potential bandits swarmed in all the time due to the fame of Tantalus' former golden-haired member. The big guy himself was keeping relatively busy with some new wacky, farfetched scheme, and all his subordinates were unfortunately on the ride with him.

It was perhaps a humorous pity that the "relationship" Blank and Lani had was getting nowhere. The redheaded bounty hunter was somehow smitten by the thief, whereas he was never in the mood to positively respond to her advances. Perhaps, had the lady been more of... well, a *lady*, then Blank would have no problems with her presence. But with an unpredictable and sometimes uncontrollable woman like Lani, only a few people had the resolve to withstand her.

Marcus and Cinna, while lacking in their own individual love interests, made up for the "loss" by helping their Boss in his business. Baku was starting to lean towards legitimacy (God forbid), and

although the proposition sounded even more audacious than kidnapping Garnet, it was actually faring pretty well. Cid and Hilda Falbool helped their furry friend whenever possible, of course, and the members of Tantalus soon discovered that having “respect” was not that bad of a deal.

Ruby and her theater were both faring well, though they both lacked company. Ruby needed friends to hang out with and the stage needed actors to perform on, and while the Vivi army had helped out whenever they could, the project seemed to be going nowhere fast. The other members of Tantalus swore that whenever they had the time they would help Ruby out, but for “some” reason, they never really seemed available.

“I wonder why,” muttered Zidane to his wife. She gave him a gentle slap on the arm, but her hidden giggle told him that she agreed.

“Excuse me,” said Steiner once all members of Tantalus had told about their recent past. “If I may be so bold as to ask, why have you come here? I am sure that this is not just a social call.”

“The blockhead is right,” pointed Baku rudely. “There’s actually a good reason why we came here. Well... there’s actually two, but one of them has

something to do with Lani.” Most everyone turned towards the dark-skinned woman, half of them expecting her to say something reasonably vulgar, or at least senseless. But what she truly said was perhaps the biggest shock of the day.

“Yeah... I got something to say...” With a dramatic pause, Lani the bounty hunter stood out of her chair, saluted boldly, and pointed her arm at Amarant. “Listen, your royal highnesses! I know that sometimes you doubt Amarant’s sources, and perhaps you might even consider him a traitor, but take it from me, the only person outside of the Hunter who knows him best! Please, everyone, please trust Amarant!!”

“Huh?” Across the rectangular dining table, most everyone wore a look of confusion on their faces. They had a tough time believing that Lani would stick up for her flaming former partner like that, especially after what he did to her in Madain Sari, but even more puzzling was how she knew of everyone’s doubt. Amarant had just came to the kingdom yesterday, and no Moogles had been told of the news.

“Lani, how do you know about all this?” asked Garnet. The Queen’s would-be captor looked at the

liege and gave her a shockingly civil look.

“You underestimate my sources!” she squealed. “But seriously, let’s just say that I have a lot of friends nobody else knows about. The point is, though, you should really trust him. He’s not doing this to harm the kingdom or anything! Believe me!!” Lani smiled politely, for once, but she could get nobody to heed her words—not even Amarant himself.

“Hey,” he muttered, “sit down before you fall down.”

“Stuff it up your anus, Red!!!” screeched the hunter. “I’m here to *help* you!! Jeez! I came all this way to stick up for you, even though you don’t deserve it, and this is—”

“Enough!!!” barked the Hunter, forcing even loudmouthed Lani to shut up. The dark-haired man of 55 years usually had a very calm, slick, and heavily-accented voice, but when he shouted, it was like a lion roaring. Silence dominated the whole dining room for a few good seconds before the man in a green cloak continued.

“Madame, I appreciate your testimony,” he said to the silenced Lani. “And Coral, I really expected

you to be a whole lot more grateful. Now before I start sounding like some cajoling parent, I'd like to ask my pupil the *true* reason he came here. It's heartwarming to hear such loyalty, especially from one who has good reason to be anything but, but you could've sent that in a Moogole letter. I smell something more than this testimony of loyalty and faith, and you all know how sensitive my nose is."

A pause. The Hunter sniffed and silently excused himself as he sat back down.

"Strong words from a man so revered!" exclaimed Baku. "And he's right; there *is* more to our visit than just Lani's little declaration!"

"Then for the love of all things good and sacred, *get on with it*, man!" barked Steiner. Baku grumbled and waved at the armored man lazily.

"Bah, be patient, numbskull! I'm getting to it!"

"Numbskull!?!?!?!?"

"Gwahahahahahahaaaa!!! Anyway..... Well, I guess it's easier to see it than to tell about it..." And without another word, Baku and all of Tantalus stood to their feet, and walked over to Zidane and Garnet. To the amazement of everyone present,

every last member of Tantalus knelt down on the ground and hung their heads in abject humility.

“Your excellencies,” began Baku, “if it pleases you, on behalf of all of Tantalus and everyone affiliated with it... I, Baku, wish to declare a never-ending oath of loyalty, devotion, and honor to the throne of Alexandria, and all who are seated on it!”

“We’re right with you, bro—I mean, sire!” stated Marcus.

“Command us as you would command your most devoted knights!” begged Blank.

“Our skills are yours to use!” declared Cinna.

“We pledge loyalty to you, O sovereign!!” sang Genero and Benero.

“Y’all are gonna have us as yer allies from this day forward!!” exclaimed Ruby. Lani was last.

“Your most graceful majesties, I was once your enemy! I was once a hired thug who wanted to kidnap Garnet and to kill Zidane! Yet now, please allow me to humbly serve you as an eternal guardian and friend! Allow me the privilege of being one of your closest and most trusted guards, and I swear on my own blood that I shall serve you to the end of my

days!!!” Lani, Baku, and everyone else that belonged to Tantalus each pledged their eternal loyalty to the speechless monarchs, who were so puzzled and enraptured with the sudden declaration that they really couldn’t do a thing—except smile along with the thieves.

“.....Uh... jeez!” sang Zidane weakly. “I... wow! This is... wow, really... too much! Gosh...” The King blushed bashfully, and his wife (who was a little more used to such declarations of loyalty) smiled gently as she proclaimed each of them a permanent member of the Alexandrian elite guard. Meanwhile, Beatrix, Steiner, and Freya all took in the heartwarming scene with several grains of salt.

“Looks like it’s going to get much more crowded around here!” said the dragoon. Steiner shrugged.

“I suppose the more, the merrier, eh!!”

Now with a host of powerful allies at its disposal, the kingdom of Alexandria was now completely prepared to face the invading force that would inevitably come. However, even as forces gathered in the kingdom, hundreds of Moogles came swarming in with news of other invasions from

every corner of the globe. This new threat was eerily reminiscent of when Ignus had attacked, for the fiery General had used very similar tactics when invading Alexandria—and so had another defeated enemy before him, the Foe. It seemed, according to Zidane, that their basic enemy was a one-trick pony.

“He’s either incredibly stupid or else he’s got some really big plan going on,” muttered the King. “I mean, sure those other invasions are a threat, but... jeez! Does this guy take us for a fool or what?”

“He knows that Alexandria will split up their forces in order to take care of the minor threats,” mentioned Gash. “No matter how little these dangers may be, one force or another will go and quell them, leaving the kingdom defenseless. It’s a strategy that’s been proven time and again, so why should this unknown enemy change such a surefire tactic, despite the number of times it’s been used?”

“Yeah, you’re right,” grumbled Zidane sourly. “We can’t just let the whole world suffer while we’re waiting for some bad guy to show up! But... with all this recent news of an even worse attack, I don’t think we have a soldier to spare. We’re stuck here!” Frantic and searching for answers, Zidane

turned to the three wisest councilors in the whole kingdom, and begged them with eyes of shimmering blue to figure out some method of attack—as well as a method of defense.

It was true that both the Foe and Kyahar Ignus had used these very same tactics in their own invasion, and both forces had been met with relative success. However, the Foe's attack had also disabled the world's communication briefly, rendering any calls to neighboring countries useless, and Ignus' scheme had involved attacking every major country outside of the Mist Continent. This new diversion, while basically a carbon copy of the previous two, was all the more dangerous, as the forces now seemed spread over the entire globe.

“What're we gonna *do?!'*” cursed the King, pounding his fist on the table. He let out a scorching-hot breath of irritation and anxiety, but perhaps the worst blow to his self-esteem was the fact that he was going to be faced with a tough decision no matter what. News had come that Mognet Central was among the many places that had been hit, so communication to other countries was out of the question once again, and unless they had received the call, nobody else would be available to help.

Besides, with the entire world now under attack, every country, city, and town in the world was suffering, so it was literally impossible for Alexandria to receive any help. With the possibility of a near-apocalyptic invasion growing closer on the horizon, the fair kingdom had not a man nor a woman to spare; *everyone* had to stay behind to defend the kingdom. But if the forces remained, then what could stop the enemy from destroying and/or occupying all the towns and cities of the world?

A council of some of the finest minds and soldiers of the kingdom took place immediately, with the Three Wise Strategists, the King and Queen, Beatrix, and Steiner at the forefront, along with a few others mixed in as well. They had to devise some way of both defending and assaulting on two different fronts, and a few ideas were already coming to mind.

It was first suggested that Alexandria split her forces in half, with part staying behind and part going out in the world, but that was quickly rejected. A second option was to send out the seven-fastest airships in the whole kingdom (with a legion of troops on each) that could dispel the threats quickly and return home before the invaders came. That also was rejected.

Some recommended that a tiny force be sent out to Mognet Central to liberate the place, then communications would be up again and the other countries of the world could act accordingly. However, since every place on the planet was now being attacked by this persistent enemy, it seemed a useless gesture. Others proclaimed that there could be a force of specialists that would take a single airship, and use it to travel from one city to another, liberating the locations and gaining allies as they leaped around—but this was also dismissed as there were too many places to save, and not enough time to reach all of them.

“This is hopeless!!” shouted Zidane as he banged his fists on the table. “I can’t believe that we can’t even figure out a good strategy! We can’t just let the whole world suffer like this!”

“You people are thinking too much with your muscles, and not enough with your hearts,” said the Hunter with a hint of bitterness. The council turned their focus towards he who dared say such words, yet the dark-haired old man didn’t back down in the least—in fact, he flaunted his words proudly.

“That’s right,” he spat, “you’re all a bunch of stiff-necked morons! If any of you had any heart

left, then you would've solved this little puzzle already!"

"Then pray, tell us what your brilliant idea is," said Bosh. The Hunter grumbled grudgingly and crossed his sinewy arms.

"Morons..." he muttered again, "absolute morons... Here, here, listen to what I have to say! Alexandria does not need an army to protect it—just a large team of expert warriors and mages. My suggestion is simple, and since we don't have all the time in the world, it'll be brief.

"I say we send out all the soldiers but a skeleton force, and keep that small number—say, a thousand or so—right here to defend Alexandria."

"But that's preposterous!!!" spat Mash. "This kingdom would be turned into dust if such a small company were to guard it!"

"Ya didn't even let me finish..." grumbled the dark-haired man. Mash leered at the Hunter but kept his tongue, and Garnet goaded the older mercenary on. "...Right. Anyway, you don't need more than a thousand or so soldiers. I may be thinking naively, but if you keep all your archers and mages, then they

can wipe out the peanut galleries while the rest of us take out the leader of the group.”

“This is a most unsound strategy, Mr. Hunter!!” barked Bosh. “Using archers and mages might be good at picking off a few soldiers, but wouldn’t you think that most of them will be able to spill into our gates?”

“Not if you hand-pick the absolute best shots and wizards you’ve got,” muttered the cloaked man. “I once read a document that told of a legendary man named Gilgamesh, who gathered together ninety-nine of the most powerful, skilled, and sharpest minds and fighters the world has ever known: the Century Warriors. He used this force of one-hundred to wipe out an army ten times larger, and not a one of the warriors suffered death!”

“That was in the day of Master Atma!” retaliated Gash. “...As well as the Four Great Generals of the world! But all the Century Warriors are either dead, vanished, or too old to fight! And this upcoming force will be even more devastating than the one Gilgamesh fought!”

“Morons...” muttered the Hunter again. He sighed, and reasoned that only bluntness would suit these Wise Masters best. “All right, I’ll make this

plain and simple. If you gather together myself and the absolute best warriors this kingdom has to offer—and I *mean* the absolute best—and if you take all of us and use our combined might to take out the leader of the pack, then wouldn't you think that his subordinate soldiers would lose their nerve? After all, we would have destroyed their leader, right in front of their face!

“And if I'm not mistaken,” he said in a low, dark voice, “we have two summoners here with us.” The three strategists—indeed, most of the council itself—began mumbling and murmuring amongst themselves, many of them still in doubt over the unorthodox and highly-dangerous strategy.

“Mr. Hunter, we do not think that—”

“That's right, ya didn't think at all!”

“HOW DARE YOU!!!”

“You wouldn't know how to think your way out of a one-way maze!!!!”

“Enough of this nonsense!!”

“By God, you're dense!!!”

“You dare have the nerve...”

“Only if...”

“We should...”

“I oughta...”

“*Enough* of this!!!!!!” All voices, every last screaming one of them, ceased and were silenced by Lady Freya’s shout, and Steiner’s subsequent slamming of the flat end of his sword on the table. Both noises succeeded in stopping the heated and immature argument, and Freya’s evergreen eyes coldly bored into anyone else who had anything to say.

“Children,” she hissed, “you are all acting like children!”

“That’s only because—”

“I did not allow you the honor of speaking!!” she snapped. The Hunter growled and curled his lip in a nasty snarl, but otherwise remained silent.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “Got carried away. I apologize.”

“Apology accepted,” sniffed Freya darkly. “... But this bickering is useless. Hunter, I don’t know you—I can’t boast of anybody here that really does

—but I do know a bit about battle tactics, and I believe that your idea may work.”

“But... Lady Freya...”

“I *also* believe that we’ll need to change the situation a little,” she stated, glaring coolly at the three old men. “The Hunter was correct when he suggested using our finest forces to attack the root of the problem. But I also believe that we need to send our skeleton forces out *there*, while keeping the brunt of our army here, where it belongs. We may be able to afford losing a few dozen soldiers for each area being attacked, but I suppose that if we’re going to attack the leader first, then we can make such sacrifices.

“Therefore,” she continued, “I suggest keeping the majority of our army behind, and to send..... well, perhaps a few dozen would be best. Yes, maybe we need to send about fifty or so soldiers to each area in question, and hope that they can turn the tides a little. If I’m not mistaken, the enemy in question has divided *his* forces as well—after all, are not the ones attacking every country in the world also a part of the enemy’s army??”

A pause. Beatrix smiled.

“Your words and thoughts are sound and true, Lady Freya,” admitted Mash. “We ourselves have considered different possibilities of your strategy, though we could never agree on such a conclusion. I think, however, when you combine your notion with the Hunter’s, then we may very well pull out a victory!” Freya smiled humbly and nodded her head in thanks; however, Zidane would not allow his friend such a lack of praise.

“All right, Freya! You rule!” The Burmecian-turned-Alexandrian grinned and even blushed a tad, but an announcement from Steiner washed her pride away.

“Whatever our strategy may be, I suggest we execute it, and fast. Who knows when the enemy may show up, so we need to be prepared!”

“Excuse me...” came a sudden but soft voice. Everyone in the council room paused and turned around to see who had spoke. Standing in the doorway of the room, with her walking stick in her hands and her dark glasses over her eyes, was the unidentified golden-haired young lady that Amarant had brought in. A few people stood up in respect for her.

“Yes, Milady?” said Garnet. The girl paused darkly, and Zidane could’ve sworn that she was shivering.

“I don’t mean to sound questionable, but... *I* know when the enemy will arrive.”

“Impossible!!” choked Gash. “How could you know such a thing?!?” Another dark pause hung in the air before the girl answered his question.

“...Just let me speak, please.” Gash sighed heavily, but silently granted her request. “Thank you. Yes, I know when the enemy will arrive, and if you’re still intent on facing him, then you had better send your forces out as quickly as possible.”

“Why’s that?” asked Beatrix.

“Because,” answered the girl, “the enemy will arrive in this kingdom in a week’s time.”

It was a dark and dreary day that ushered in the last moments of the great invasion. The sky was red, literally red, as red as the blood in a man’s veins. Thunder rumbled across the heavens, as if the Creator Himself was dreading this day. The trees shivered in the sick breeze, and the earth groaned as

it anticipated the massacre that would happen that day. Birds screeched in horror, dogs yipped wildly, and even the babies were wailing. The dark day of the invasion had come: up until now, the citizens of Alexandria had experienced nothing more than mere birth pains, but now the dreaded day had finally come, at long last. A single week had indeed passed, and the “child” was ready to come.

The weather alone portended a day filled with doom and destruction, and if it were possible, all of creation would have moaned in agony because of such horrible anticipation. The Foe, Kyahar Ignus, Kuja, Garland, Necros..... each of these despicable enemies had already caused the kingdom massive grievances, yet as unbelievable as it sounded, the eras of horror that all these previous villains had ushered in were nothing more than slight contractions in comparison to what was truly coming. The enemy, the one feared even by Amarant, was approaching Alexandria on a black horse as maniacal as the Reaper himself.

In the earliest hours of the bloody day, a dark-haired nobleman named Vikar Iudicium led his entire army to the castle of Alexandria. What was most surprising was that there were very few human soldiers in such a brigade; instead, legions upon

legions of soulless golems marched down the fields of green, every one of them as empty and void of life as a suit of armor. They would literally march into the jaws of Hell itself and think nothing of it; Death was not a concept to them, nor was there a concept of mercy or surrender. These beasts knew nothing except devastation, and Iudicium commanded no less than 8,000 of them.

The castle of Alexandria stood mightily between a ground that would soon be soaked with blood, and a sky as vermillion as the Rider of Slaughter. Iudicium wore a pure-white coat and white leggings—in fact, only his naked face was not such a pure color, and it gave off an aura of pride, and confidence, and patience, and most lethal of them all, revenge. Only his crimson eyes matched the hues of nature perfectly, and the empty eyes of the beasts amassed behind him glowed just as brightly. It was as if all of creation was begging for one last, great, glorious massacre, and the forces of darkness were only too willing to deliver.

Vikar Iudicium slowly led his forces through the plains and up to the clearing that led to the castle. It was here where he paused, just slightly, to stare at the castle in quiet thought. Nobody knew what sort of diabolical schemes that this man would be

hatching, though they would all probably lead to chaos. Here was a man who punished cowards by feeding them to his starving dogs, or else throwing them naked on a grill and letting them slowly burn to their death on the steel platform. Iudicum held control over the golems behind him, and though he only carried a single weapon, all of nature feared his very presence.

The air would soon fill with the black smoke of flames and ashes, and the blood that would soon splatter on the ground would only give way to even more thirst. The dull golems held no emotion as they marched across the green fields of soon-to-be-burned grass, and kept marching until they were close to the castle. Iudicum kept all his nerves in check, even though anyone could tell that this was a day that he had been anticipating for many years now. His smile was barely contained, and the adrenaline in his body throbbed with an aching sensation, begging to be let loose and soil the ground with blood.

“NOW!!!” Suddenly, a hailstorm of arrows belched out of the turrets and windows of the castle, raining heavily upon the unsuspecting creatures. For this surprise attack there was no defense, and many creatures were killed or wounded because of

Alexandria's preemptive strike. Iudicium's own horse was mauled by the arrows, but the man himself escaped unscathed. In fact, he even caught an errant arrow with his bare hand, just before it struck his chest.

"It seems as if somebody in there knew we were coming," he noted blandly. "Hmm... I wonder who it could have been...?"

"Probably the girl, sir," suggested the nearest commander to him. Iudicium sniffled up something and quietly agreed.

"Most likely. It would be logical to assume that she has already made it inside this facility, and that her person is either being protected or else hidden. Well, I can take care of her at my own leisure; until then, I do suggest that you and your fellow subordinates go in and slaughter those archers who struck my golem army. You really do have no idea how expensive those things are."

"I obey, sir!" barked the commander, and he led the first charge in the greatest invasion that Alexandria had ever been through. Iudicium, however, stayed behind briefly, rubbing his lips with his finger and mulling to himself.

“...Brahne... the injuries you may inflict on me today will be but scratches compared to the agonizing torture I will send you through. Grilling your fat flabby body on my ovens is too merciful a punishment for you. Perhaps I shall think of some proper device of execution later, as I wade my way through your pitiful kingdom. Though I do guarantee, Brahne, that there will be nothing left of Alexandria except for ashes and bad memories.” Taking in a deep breath, Iudicium quietly followed the charging golems inside the castle gates, and was only mildly surprised to catch them and his human subordinates locked in ferocious battle with the “enemy” forces.

As far as the eye could see, there was carnage and devastation everywhere. Iudicium’s plan of forcing Alexandria’s army to split apart seemed to have worked: there were considerably less people there than usual. Well, the numbers were hardly important to him—he would have disposed of them all *eventually*. The one thing he *really* wanted to do was to reach the Queen, and execute her in a most proper style, and then declare judgment on the rest of the kingdom. For the time being, he would simply ignore his warring forces, and the army they fought

against. They were but pawns in this game. Disposable. Insignificant. *Almost* rubbish.

“Not so fast there, mister!!”

Iudicium let out a slight groan as the voice called out to him, and as he turned around, he saw a small force consisting of a boy with a tail, and two mismatched hoodlums who seemed no more skilled at fighting than a platypus. They were all carrying impressive-looking weapons, though not a one of them seemed to match the power staring back at them. With a single uninterested sigh, Iudicium asked in no excited terms what their business was.

“Hm, and what do we have here?”

“Trust me, pal!” called out the boy with the tail. “You *don’t* wanna know!!” A pause.

“...I see,” muttered the man in white. “Just a small gang of riffraff, not even worth coughing at. Boy, I suggest that if you want to live, you should attend to your own duties.”

“This *is* my duty, bucko!” shouted the kid, brandishing his weapon. “I’m gonna make sure that scum like you don’t ever attack nice kingdoms like this again!”

“And eloquent too, I see,” muttered Iudicium. “Well, if an urchin such as yourself is defending this kingdom, then Alexandria should have been reduced to dust long before my own birth! But, since you look to be but half my age, then I shall humor you and allow you one last chance to leave.”

“I don’t think you heard me!!” growled the boy with a tail. “I *said* that you’re not gonna get past me! If you wanna get anywhere in this kingdom, you’re gonna have to go through me!!!”

“Typical hotheaded youth,” sneered Iudicium sourly. “I do not believe that you know who you are dealing with, child. However, as per instructions gathered from your ultimatum, I shall have contest with you and your, eh, affiliates.”

“Blank,” said one, hefting a sword.

“Marcus,” said the other. Iudicium didn’t even bother to crack a smile.

“Quite. And you, young man?”

“I’m Zidane!” he cried, wielding his blade fiercely. Iudicium gave him a dull look and crossed his arms.

“Hm. I don’t believe this calls for excessive force on my part, just a bit of finesse. Boy, I am ready to brush you aside any time the fates spurn you.”

“Oh, I’ve had it up to here with you!!” screamed Zidane, and the seasoned Genome ran towards the man in white with all the ferocity and power that he had summoned in the fights with Kuja. His blade crashed through the burning atmosphere and sailed down towards Iudicium’s shoulder, yet was promptly stopped by the man, with little more than his two index fingers holding the blade! A sudden freeze in action caused Zidane to grimace with rage as he saw his weapon being blocked with almost no effort from his foe’s part; Iudicium looked bored out of his mind.

“Like I said,” he spoke, “you should have left when you had the chance. But now, you shall pay the price for standing in my way!!!” And with a sudden thrust, the white-clothed man buried his knee in Zidane’s gut, knocking the poor boy’s breath out fast and hard. Zidane bowled over in unimaginable pain, causing him to loosen his grip on his weapon, thus allowing Iudicium’s fingers the freedom they needed to curl into fists and slam into the boy’s block. In just two titanic hits, the Genome who had

defeated Kuja and Garland was on the floor, not moving a muscle.

“Next?” said the only man standing, catching a glimpse at Marcus and Blank. The two stared at him in horror, having barely followed the brief fracas, yet their amazement soon turned into ferocity, and the two seasoned thieves ran forth to test their fate. Both of their blades crashed down on the terrifying invader, yet both were caught with his bare hands, and both thieves received a powerful kick in each of their midsections. Iudicium actually ripped their weapons from out of their hands, and literally shattered them to pieces as he broke them over his knee.

“Are you quite done?” he asked, dusting his hands off. The two thieves remained on the floor, very much defeated, yet stubborn Zidane was not down by a longshot. He slowly stood to his feet yet again, throwing his dagger to the side and reaching into a bag for a weapon he had hoped he would never use again. Out came one of the great legendary weapons of the world, the Ultimate Weapon, and the Genome twirled it like fans of a windmill as he glowered back at his foe.

“Try blocking *this* with your fingers!” he shouted—and without any more threats, the boy raced forward with his weapon spinning in the air. Iudicium remained completely petrified, content to merely watch the young man dash at him, but at the very last second, his own sword came out of its sheath, and easily blocked the Ultimate Weapon.

“I admit that your tool is not one I could deflect using my own body,” he muttered calmly. “However, as you’ll realize, you might soon wish that I had.” Iudicium gave Zidane a rare smile, and the boy’s eyes grew to the size of moons as he beheld the dark-haired man’s weapon. It was easily as big as his own!

“Holy crap!” he sputtered. “That’s one big sword!”

“Tis’ not the size of the sword that counts, boy!” snarled Iudicium as he pushed the Genome backwards. “...But the skills of the warrior who wields it! Observe, boy, as I prove every power that you once had now useless!!” With a sudden fierce shove, Iudicium pushed his opponent backwards and ran forward with his own blade, hacking and slashing at such an indescribable speed that not even the twin blades of Ultima Weapon could compete.

With almost no effort at all, Iudicium slapped the tool from Zidane's hands, then slashed at the defenseless boy with his own powerful blade. The cut barely nicked Zidane's skin, but every slice after that came in direct contact, slowly whittling away at Zidane's flesh like a tongue. A powerful punch to the face sent the boy to the ground, wherein Iudicium mercilessly hacked at the boy's exposed body with his sword, opening up dozens of scars yet leaving him alive enough to feel every little slash he gave. A final powerful kick to the ribs sent Zidane flying, and a sword completely devoid of any blood found its way into Iudicium's sheath.

Too easy.

The flames of war continued to dance out of control as a single man in white calmly walked through the kingdom. Sounds of suffering were just barely tickling his insensitive ears, but even the loudest of them went unheard as he continued his journey towards the throne room. He could honestly care less that there were people dying everywhere he walked; these lives meant nothing to him at all, not even the lives of his men. If they died, fine. If they lived, fine. If they won, fine. If they lost.....

Well, he thought to himself, *they will not lose, because I will not lose.*

Amidst the fires and the flames, Iudicium ran into yet another obstacle in his path, though this one seemed to bear more of a challenge than the last. It contained a young female that bore a powerful resemblance to the Zidane chap he had beaten before—in fact, she even had the tail—and two others who were also from a questionable source: one a bloated Qu, the other a fierce-looking female Burmecian. Iudicium knew enough of the world to have his eye set on the Burmecian, but the others were of no threat to him at all. *At all.*

“Good morrow,” he greeted like the nobleman he was. “I must ask that if you are on my side, you should kindly relocate yourself, and that if you are against me, you should run straight into the flames. T’would be better to kill your own self than to face me in a fight.”

“Please,” moaned the Burmecian. “Don’t underestimate us. If you’ve gotten this far, then Zidane and the others have already done some significant damage. I’m sure you won’t be able to get past me, and if you do, there are still others waiting for you.”

“Is that a fact?” asked Iudicium. “Well, now, why in the world are so many people lining up to destroy me? Surely they know better!”

“You would be surprised at how often logic escapes these people,” said the female Genome blankly. “...Yet, it is oftentimes through their lack of common sense that they are victorious. However, in this group, I shall be the voice of reason, and Quina the voice of recklessness, and Freya the strength that supports us, so in truth, you have no prayer.”

A pause.

“...Quina... Freya... and you, Miss?”

“Mikoto.”

“Quite,” sniffed Iudicium. “Listen, eh, Miss Mikoto, I do not know where you came from or why you are here, so let me be blunt and say that I have dealt with the, eh, ‘guardians’ of this kingdom, and not a one of them could lay a blow on me. I cannot boast the same for any of them.”

“What you say?!” boomed the Qu. “You hurt Zidane? You hurt my friends?”

“...Why, yes!” chimed Iudicium. “As a matter of fact, I do believe that I did! What are you going to

do about it?”

“We fight you!!” shouted Quina, brandishing a powerful fork. Iudicium regarded the eating utensil with feigned interest.

“I can imagine the battles you must go through with a tool like that,” he said. “But, still, if it is my head you seek, then you may have it if you can best me.” His powerful and large sword emerged from his sheath yet again (probably reserved for Freya alone), and in the midst of the flames and smoke and the red sky above, it glistened like a devil’s eye.

“Fine!” shouted Freya, producing her own weapon. “Have at you!!” The snarl on the Burmecian’s face would have been fierce enough to deter any opponent, but Iudicium personally found it quite beautiful. However, he would have to savor her skills later, as Mikoto and Quina were first up in the fight. The large Qu bounced forward with its powerful fork, whilst the more graceful Genome slithered forward with her glaive. Quina jabbed first, yet Iudicium only had to sidestep it once. He quickly grabbed the utensil with his bare hands, and with a single chop, shattered it in two. Quina nearly screamed as the beloved weapon broke to pieces, and would have smothered Iudicium with its own

bulk had not the man grabbed such a bulk and twirled it around until it was launched straight at Mikoto. Such a large missile like Quina was unavoidable, even for a Genome, but Mikoto was able to leap up without taking too heavy of a hit. With Quina grounded and weaponless, it was up to her to finish the job.

However, just as Mikoto glared at the man in white and Freya stepped forward to test her own skills, three more characters came in from the left side of the town, parting the sea of flames and fighters in their wake. They would have been an unstoppable force if they had ever actually gotten along, but up until that very moment, their alliance was completely nonexistent. They were Amarant, the Hunter, and Lani, and now that they were cornering Iudicium in a pincer trap, it seemed that the invasion was going to come to an extremely quick end.

“Oh? And what’s this?” he asked, spying the three newcomers. The Hunter crossed his arms in a surly manner and smirked at the younger man.

“Ha! Do ye really think that you can face five of the world’s best warriors all at once? I don’t think even I could.”

“Yeah!” screamed Lani. “You’re going down! I, Lani, the world’s most beautiful and powerful ex-bounty hunter will make sure that you meet an extremely grisly end!!” A pause. Iudicium regarded the dark-skinned woman with a smile so fake, even the unidentified blonde girl could have seen it (wherever she was).

“(Note to self: torture the girl when you have the chance),” he muttered.

“Eh? What was that?”

“Nothing, dear,” he replied coolly, making sure all his nails were filed properly. “Nothing, nothing at all.” Lani snarled and stepped forth to reply with a nasty phrase, but Amarant stopped her.

“Enough talk,” he growled. “I gotta score to settle with this guy. The rest of you do whatever.” Only Lani seemed truly confused about what he had just said; the Hunter nodded as if he understood, and allowed his pupil the space he needed. Alone, Amarant stood his ground against Iudicium, his hands waving slightly as he watched for an opening. The slightly-older man in white simply crossed his arms and smiled, all the while keeping his back to Mikoto and Freya.....

“Foolish move!!” screamed the Genome suddenly, and Mikoto lunged forth with her powerful glaive. Yet Iudicium span around so blindingly fast that he was not only able to protect himself, but he was even able to make a preemptive strike on the girl. Before Mikoto had even realized that her opponent had bolted around, he had already chopped at both sides of her neck with both of his hands—then while she was still in a brief daze, he finished her off with a scissor-chop, nearly shattering her throat with such powerful blows. Mikoto fell to the floor, thankfully gasping for air (albeit in very long and hoarse draws), leaving only four left who had a chance to stop the maniacal man.

Amarant had spied his opportunity the very second Mikoto had screamed out. Bosh and Gash had previously illustrated the strategy of trapping the leader of the invasion in a pincer move, just like when Beatrix and Freya had surrounded Ignus, and it became a plan of theirs to place Freya’s team and Amarant’s team not too far apart from each other (indeed, every team had been placed in integral parts, so as to surround Iudicium and hopefully snuff him out). If worse came to worse, Mikoto would volunteer to distract the terrible man, leaving his back exposed for any or all attackers.

Now, as Iudicium struck the Genome down, Amarant saw his chance and quickly locked his supposed enemy in a fierce hug. His arms clamped over Iudicium's stomach, his sheer mass keeping him from being flipped. Yet this man was no spring chicken when it came to getting out of such maneuvers, and a simple snap of the head to Amarant's face caused the mercenary to yell out in pain and release his prey.

Quickly, Iudicim grabbed his sword again and hastily parried the Hunter's advances. He and Lani were already quick to join the battle, and with the speed of the Hunter and the power of Lani, it would probably be over quickly. Yet no matter how fast or strong they seemed, Iudicium successfully blocked every blow—in fact, he even took offense several times—and slowly, little by little, he forced them back.

Obviously, the Hunter would prove more of a foe than Lani, what with his senses, speed, and decades of experience, so Iudicium would have to be fast if he wanted to get rid of this man. He resolved to engage Lani first, and with a single and powerful shattering blow, he completely broke her large axe apart, sending splinters to the floor as its shaft cracked into a hundred pieces. Lani actually let out a

scream as her weapon was broken, yet even her piercing wail was muffled as a merciless sword slashed at her body a hundred times.

Of course, no human being would allow such a terrifying mode of torture to continue, no matter how annoying the recipient was. Indeed, the Hunter and a recovered Amarant leaped in to save their comrade, but Iudicium was already in the middle of a battle, and his momentum carried him into these next two fights. Amarant slammed his claws onto the older man first, and though it seemed the flaming one had an advantage because of his strength, he was actually using both his hands, while Iudicium gripped his sword with only one.

The Hunter speedily dashed in on the other side, swinging both blades like a maniac. Iudicium really had to move if he wanted to parry blows from two sides, especially if these sides had a man with two weapons each. Flashes of lightning, sparks, flames, and mighty crashes of thunder and steel slamming onto steel shook the land with an unprecedented roar as these three mighty warriors did battle, and such a fracas was so terrifying that Freya, who was carefully observing Iudicium's movement, could barely submit herself to watching.

She did cover her eyes when Iudicium slashed at Amarant's legs, making great scars and sending the man to the floor, and she did cringe considerably as he rammed the butt end of his blade right into the Hunter's abdomen. Spittle and a hint of blood squirted out of the older man's mouth, and the same sword-butt was used as a merciless club to smash at the older man's defenseless face. Both the Hunter and Amarant were down, and just to make sure, Iudicium hacked at their bodies without ever getting a drop of blood on his sword.

"Are you not fighting me?" he asked of Freya. She merely glared at him, her spear silently positioned in a defensive spot.

"I'm watching," she emphasized. "I didn't want to stand by here and do nothing as my friends and allies were butchered by you, but at least I learned your moves. Now that I know what to expect, all I really have to do is keep up with you and it'll be over."

"Do you really think I will be that simple to conquer?" he asked, holding his great sword in both of his hands. Freya took a single step forward and smirked.

"I've faced worse than you."

“Really.”

“Of course. I’ve seen things that would give you nightmares, Iudicium.”

“You don’t know what nightmares *are*, Burmecian!” hissed the invader. “You might have experienced a few bad turns in your life, but to truly know what horror is... to live with it every waking moment of your life... to have it hanging over your head, like the Grim Reaper ready to thresh..... It is indeed a very indescribable feeling!”

“...I think I know what you mean,” she hissed quietly. “But no matter what sort of grudge you hold against this kingdom, it does not excuse your actions here.”

“You are just as clueless as everyone else who has come in my way!” spat Iudicium. “And, like they have, you shall meet a very gruesome fate! Be thankful I hold not a grudge against Burmecia, woman, or else I would certainly show you just what a nightmare can *really* become!!!” With that declaration said, the maniacal man ran forth and attacked first, slamming his large blade onto Freya’s spear. She wielded a legendary weapon, so it would not shatter like so many before it, but the sheer power of Iudicium’s blade nearly overcame her.

“You... are strong!” she muttered, her teeth clenched fiercely. Every last fiber of her energy had been dedicated to holding the blade back, yet for all her strength, Iudicium still looked like he had been fighting with half a heart. Only the smallest trace of strain was on his face; Freya looked like she was trying to push an elephant.

“I’ve worked quite hard to get to this position,” said Iudicium in a ghastly calm voice. “I should be worlds stronger than your everyday soldier, and probably mightier than your best.”

“I wouldn’t put money on that,” managed Freya. She suddenly leaped back with her powerful legs, and caught her breath for awhile as she emphasized. “...There are those who have the power to slay hundreds, even thousands. One of them is a certain woman that is as close to me as a sister!”

“Do not attempt to threaten me with your sentimentality, Burmecian,” said Iudicium coldly. “You may *think* there are those that have power over me, but in reality, they that Judge others shall always emerge on top!!” Iudicium ran forward again, the time for talk now long since past for him, and attacked Freya with all his might. The speed at which he swung that monstrous sword of his was

completely impossible, yet it was as if the thing weighed no more than a mere twig.

Freya, on the other hand, had to use every ounce of skill in her soul to defend against such an agonizing foe. Her spear oftentimes weaved in ways that she never thought possible, or else her body twirled and danced in positions foreign to her. Her legs were slightly stronger than the rest of her body, so she was easily able to *run* and to *keep up* with Iudicium, but as for sheer strength...

The invader and the former Burmecian fought and battled for what seemed like hours, their weapons crashing together like two thunders. Not even the rumbling skies above, nor the blazing inferno of battle around them, could quite measure up to such intensity and ferocity that was expressed then. They were not two warriors—it was more like watching an angel and a demon do war than anything else. To be able to even watch a battle such as this would be terrifying enough; being in it would have been a true nightmare.

After an unknown amount of time, battle fatigue finally reached Freya's body, and though her spirit and soul were strong, the flesh was weak, and could succumb to mightier powers than its own. Iudicium

suddenly slapped the Dragon's Whisker spear away for a period, gaining him the open space he needed to ram the butt of his sword back at his opponent. Then, with the momentum of his swinging blade, he cut a terrible gash on Freya's body, ripping apart her traditional dragoon's costume, her hair, and quite a bit of her flesh as well. The wound was not deep, but it stung like acid, and the dragoon let out a single piercing scream before tumbling to the ground.

Her shriek was amplified and lengthened as Iudicium let his sword plummet towards her neck, but just before he could decapitate her, he paused and let the blade stop, mere whiskers away from slicing Freya's throat. Perspiring heavily, breathing heavily, and trembling heavily from exhaustion and fear, Freya could only quiver as her attacker smiled down on her.

"Like I said," he spoke, "I have no quarrel with you, Burmecian. I'll leave you alive, as I left everyone else alive, but not without suffering." And then, without mercy, he kicked at Freya's defenseless body and began to shred it with his blade. This butchering did not continue for long, but the sheer pain of having a blade kiss one's own body several dozen times was an experience Freya never wanted to repeat again. Iudicium did in fact leave

her alive, though horribly scarred, and bleeding just enough to be considered out of the fight.

Vikar Iudicium just had to wonder who would be next to stop him.

The final few foes that stood between Iudicium and the throne were not exactly the warriors he had expected. Of course, two of Alexandria's greatest knights were there, plus a young black mage, but that was the only real threat out there. There was a short unshaven man who wielded a hammer, a blue-haired flute-bearing girl with a horn, and a pretty young lady with long black hair, and that was all.

"You dare come to Alexandria in war?!" boomed the male knight. "You dare declare war on a peace-loving country?! How do you have the nerve to even show yourself?!"

"Peace-loving?" parroted Iudicium. "*Peace-loving?* My dear knight, how mistaken you are! You are a fool!!!" The knight, Captain A. Steiner, snorted and held his blade tighter still.

"Bah! I may not be a genius, but I know that this country is one who embraces serenity and tranquility! How you have the nerve to think otherwise is beyond my comprehension!"

“You are but a fool!” repeated Iudicium. “Was not your Queen, that fat oaf Brahne, an enormous fan of mass-slaughter and widespread destruction? Did she not sponsor the near-genocidal attacks of Burmecia and Cleyra? Was she not responsible for nearly leveling Lindblum? And was she not almost close enough to burn Madain Sari to the ground, and most assuredly the Iifa Tree with it??!! EH?! Tell me, knight, is *this* your definition of peace?!”

“You be silent!!” barked the female knight, Beatrix. “Yes, it is true that Brahne has caused much sorrow in the past! But she has already paid for her crimes! Why then do you come to us and make these accusations?!”

“What do you mean?!” demanded the nobleman. “Where *is* that greasy tub, anyway? Or has her cowardice also become bloated?!?!”

“You dare speak of the Queen that way—!”

“Enough of this!!” shouted the young girl suddenly. Steiner and Beatrix froze and stood off a bit to the side to allow her to speak. The girl, who was the new Queen of the kingdom, paused briefly to gather her words together. She would definitely need them most at this stage.

“...Queen Brahne... perished in the battle over Madain Sari,” she began slowly. “...She has paid for her crimes with her demise. *I* am now Alexandria, Mr. Iudicium, so if you have any problems, you should take them to me!” A pause. Iudicium rubbed his chin in thought and considered what the young girl had said.

“...Brahne has died?”

“Yes.” Another pause. Iudicium took in a deep breath and briefly reconsidered his actions.

“...That makes little difference,” he muttered. “It is true that my heart gladdens to hear of the Queen’s death, but that alone does not satisfy my needs. *Alexandria* is the cause of my strife; Brahne was merely the figurehead behind it all. If the Queen Bee dies, the whole hive does not die as well; yea, in fact, it may strengthen even more!”

“But I don’t understand!” replied Garnet. “Why are you so mad at us in the first place? What have we ever done to you? What’s the point behind all this suffering?!” The Queen’s voice was pleading and just a bit whiny, yet the melody in her tone was darkened by the ominous skies, and by the insane laughter of Vikar Iudicium.

“Hahahahaha...
HAAAAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!! O, ye
foolish woman, art thou so blinded to the truth?!?!”

“What are you laughing at?!” demanded Steiner.
“Speak, villain!!” Iudicium glared at the armored
knight with a sickening grin, and bared his sword for
the whole world to see.

“I see, so you all have been left in the dark! Well
then, let me explain it to you! Many months ago,
perhaps a year or two ago around this very time,
your precious Queen Brahne waged a greed-
powered war on the world, correct?”

“...Well...”

“She destroyed *anything* that got in her way,
correct?!”

“...I, uh...”

“And that *included* the entire Iudicium family
legacy!!!” By now, Iudicium had turned from a
calm, gentlemanly noble into a ferocious, screaming
demon, and was even frothing at the mouth a bit.
The look on his face was that of twisted rage and
unbridled insanity, and not even the blade he carried
was so sharp.

“...Are you saying...?”

“YES!!!!” he hissed. “Your precious Queen Brahne and her precious army of soulless black mages came to my family’s estate in order to reap its riches! She was not content with just passing by; no, she wanted it all! We Iudiciums have been an important figurehead in the economy for most of the world, but not even we could have repelled her attacks! Brahne sacked and looted what she could, and then turned our fertile lands into lifeless wastes! I survived only through the means of foreign affairs, so you can imagine my grief upon returning home!!!

“After that day, I swore righteous vengeance on the scourge that annihilated everything I had ever known, and thus set about my slow and silent campaign of destroying your unholy kingdom! Little by little, I orchestrated the invasions that you have survived over the months, until the time came when I myself would invade, and avenge my people! After all, our family motto stands as thus: ‘Take vengeance for what is unjust, and execute Judgment upon all those who commit unreasonable wrong’!”

“Savage!!” hissed Garnet—but what Iudicium said made sense, to a degree. It all really boiled down to an old act of terrorism and destruction from

the previous Queen, one that had leveled the home and lifestyle of a once-important family name. In a way, Iudicium had the right to seek out justice, and to see that Brahne—and maybe even all of Alexandria—was punished for such a crime. But as Garnet had stated before, her mother already paid the penalty for such crimes.....

“You are insane!” continued the Queen. “Alexandria is no longer the barbaric country it once was! It has changed! It has changed dramatically, for the better! Here, here! Call off your men, cease this pointless war, and I will do everything in my power to see that your woes are cared for and your losses compensated!”

“My losses will be compensated with your blood, Alexandros!” snarled Iudicium. “And I shall annihilate everything until I get what is rightfully due to me! Prepare thyself, Alexandria, for thy merciless Judgment!!!!” The deranged man in white ran forth, his blade screaming for pools of blood, and was stopped only by the combined weapons of Beatrix and Steiner.

“You want blood?” questioned the female General. “Spill ours first! I would lay my life down for her majesty!”

“And I would never think to do otherwise!” agreed Steiner. “You shall just have to get through us instead!!!” The two noble knights actually pushed Iudicium back with their combined blades, yet the enraged man was not one to give up so easily.

“...So be it,” he spat darkly. “You have sealed your fate. The gavel declares all!” With a sudden thrust, Iudicium slashed at his attackers, sending them jumping backwards briefly. Before he could take on the more powerful knights, however, he had to get through a group of less-experienced guardians.

Of Cinna he disposed easily, having only to give the bearded man a ferocious kick right in the guts. Vivi proved to be much more of a threat, and his magic actually singed Iudicium’s pure-white clothes a little. But the enraged man had not gotten this far only to be beaten by a mere mage, and as soon as Vivi prepared his next attack, Iudicium held his blade in a defensive position and actually reflected the damage back onto the mage!

“Pathetic!” he spat. “My sword Gavel has been inscribed with magic runes, thus making it the perfect tool to repulse magic attacks! Do not think that I shall submit to the same attack a second

time!!” The maniacal man grinned with glee, and turned around to see who dared strike him next. Both of the younger girls had terrible glares on their faces, but the looks on the knights’ were as steel as the blades they wielded.

“Come get some!” bellowed Steiner. “You’ll find that we’re on a completely different level than the others you’ve fought!”

“Probably,” shrugged Iudicium. “I met a Burmecian who claimed she had a powerful friend, and I hope that this beautiful woman here is it. Otherwise, the scars she’s received so far will multiply and deepen.”

“What have you done to Freya?!” roared Beatrix, her weapon pointed directly at Iudicium. The man smiled and shrugged, as if his barbaric methods were hardly worth mentioning.

“Nothing, really. I don’t talk about my fighting styles, so maybe you’ll just have to feel it yourself.” Beatrix, who could assume the worst concerning her close friend, let out an animalistic howl as she sprinted towards Iudicium. His blade met hers, and the first true hope of vanquishing this persistent invader dove into a ferocious battle, with the very future of Alexandria at stake.

Beatrix actually succeeded in forcing the older man back a step, but with a single swipe, Iudicium tossed the woman away. She did not plummet and fall like a lesser soldier would; she merely leaped to her feet and continued the assault. Steiner, not liking the fact that Beatrix was hogging all the fun (again), boldly joined her and slammed his own blade against Iudicium's sword. Save the Queen and Ragnarok throbbed together in harmony, forcing the deranged man in white back a few steps more.

Iudicium leaped off to the side, and an insane war was waged between the three of them. Swords flew at terrifying speeds, sparks belched out when steel met steel, lightning flashed and fires erupted, and the whole earth trembled as the combined forces of Beatrix and Steiner launched an all-out attack on Iudicium. Their fight was considerably fiercer than the one waged between the invader and Freya, and perhaps even deadlier as well.

But even with the speed of Beatrix and the strength of Steiner, Iudicium managed to hold his own, even though his was but one blade and theirs were two. His immense sword would have to travel at insane speeds to be able to protect against both, yet for all their skill, he was slowly gaining the upper hand. At one point, Steiner's sword had

slipped a little and scarred Iudicium's nose a bit, and all of Alexandria quickly realized that even this man could bleed.

He merely paused, wiped the vermilion off, examined it, and smiled.

Without a word, the vicious man ran forth at an even *faster* speed, and went into a completely berserk fury, lashing out with his blade at a quickness unknown to nature. It seemed like the blade moved in a blur, and was so absolutely fast that not even the knights could see it—and thus, were slowly losing.

Steiner, though armored, fell first as Iudicium slammed his blade directly on the armor. A great gashing slice had been cut in the steel, though no skin had broken at all. However, Steiner was not even allowed the time to examine such a mark, as his entire armored body was being pummeled by Iudicium's blade. Scars upon scars were being shredded into the pure steel, until at last a piece was punctured. The invader slapped the flat of his blade in Steiner's face to finish the deal, and the poor armored knight, though not badly injured, screamed most of the way down as he fell to the floor.

“You animal!” screamed Beatrix. “Come then, and see what *I* have in store for you!!” Alexandria’s champion and the last member of the Iudicium family squared off in what would probably be recorded as a legendary battle, and this one-on-one fight was perhaps even more savage than the last. Every single skill that Beatrix had learned under the tutelage of her master was put to use—*everything*, except her three forbidden skills.

Unfortunately, I can’t use those now, she thought to herself. They’re so devastating that they would rearrange the architecture of this entire kingdom, not to mention destroy any innocent bystander in its path! No, better to take things safely. Can’t use them unless I have no choice...

Beatrix was beginning to lose what choices she had in the fight.

Having only one eye to see out of, the holy knight quickly found herself outclassed by the madman. She was starting to become fatigued, and a few cuts had already been made on her own body. Aside from the scratch on his nose, Iudicium was unharmed, though it seemed as if he was looking a little weary as well. If Beatrix could only stall him for a few seconds more...

Suddenly, the unthinkable happened. Iudicium lashed out with an earth-shattering blow, specifically aimed at Beatrix's face. The General froze in horror as the blade careened towards her, and not even a fast dive away could completely stop it. The very tip of the blade completely cut through the patch on her eye, slicing it in two and sending the pieces falling to the ground.

The Garnet's surprise, Beatrix let out a scream as her patch was lost forever. She suddenly lost all will to fight, and crumbled to the floor to retrieve what was once so common to her. Everyone within visual distance was slightly surprised to see that the side of Beatrix's face that had been covered by the patch was unadulterated (save for two very tiny cuts on her forehead and cheekbone), but more surprising still was the way she mourned over such a simple object.

Crying tears of horrified grief, Beatrix plucked the torn patch up off the ground, and feebly attempted to piece it back together. But the object was lost forever; it had been shredded beyond help, and would forever remain useless. Nobody, not even Freya, knew why the General wept over such a silly object... but that didn't matter.

Only four words escaped her mouth as she wept there:

Luke..... I'm so sorry...

“...What an intriguing scene,” muttered Iudicium, who was more perplexed than anything else. He sniffled something up, and turned away from his defeated foe. Only Eiko stood in his way, and even though she put on her fiercest growl, it had no affect whatsoever—in fact, in response to her pathetic attempt, Iudicium smashed his foot against her small body, and nearly crushed the poor girl under his boot.

“Eiko!!!!!!” Garnet screamed out in horror, and out of recklessness, she dashed towards the terror with her most powerful weapon, the Tiger Racket. Iudicium finally saw his chance as the young Queen stormed towards him, and raised his weapon high in the air. He brought it down like a true gavel-wielding Judge, and with but one single stroke, completely cleaved off the left arm of Queen Garnet.

Immediately, there came a scream from Garnet’s mouth, one so loud and piercing that the heavens actually trembled. The Queen’s eyes flashed with lightning and blinding white light, as an indescribable pain and agony tore away at her body

and soul. She screamed out so loud that the very rocks cracked, and fell to the floor in mindless agony, writhing and crawling and begging for relief. The lifeless arm that had been attached to her body not three seconds ago laid useless on the floor in a disgusting slump.

“HIGHNESS!!!!!!”

“GARNET!!!!!!”

“NO!!!!!!” Instantly, more screams were added to hers, as Eiko, Beatrix, and Steiner yelled out in terror. A wounded Zidane and Freya, persistently following their foe, had limped all the way there despite their injuries, only to see their lover and Queen (respectively) hacked apart so viciously. They too screamed out for her, and even though their bodies were littered with bloody scars, they blindly ran forth to avenge such a loss.

“VIKAR IUDICIUM!!!!!! YOU WILL PAY FOR THAT!!!!!!” Yet no voice was quite as loud as Beatrix’s, who had been wallowing in meaningless grief for the past few seconds. The General stood up, renewed and ready to tear Iudicium apart, and from the looks on the faces of Steiner, Freya, Zidane, and Eiko, she would not be alone. Iudicium merely smiled.

“How absolutely typical,” he spat. Turning around, he gave the wailing Garnet a weak kick, which enraged everyone beyond the point of insanity. ‘This,’ he said darkly, “is but a taste of what will happen to you, and your kingdom, and everything you hold dear. Judgment *will* be meted out.”

“You sick, maniacal, freakish, illegitimate son of a worthless mother!!!” Zidane screamed out the worst curses he had ever known (*Author’s note: what is seen here is the edited version*) and tore after Iudicium with a strength and vengeance of his own; indeed, everybody ran towards him, despite their injuries. Yet even then, *even then*, Iudicium managed to beat them all back. He gave Zidane a vicious punch in the face, and whacked Eiko with a powerful kick as she stormed off after him. He sliced at Freya, narrowly spilling her intestines out with such a blow, and jabbed his sword straight into Steiner’s armored body. The tip of his sword just barely pierced the skin, but with the armor taking most of the blow, Iudicium was able to throw the knight away with one single powerful toss. Now, only Beatrix remained.

“Well, General,” he said, “looks like it’s just you and me.” Beatrix, having no use for words, roared

out a guttural cry of rage and justice as she attacked Iudicium, and with a power and speed unknown to even her, she slammed Save the Queen against his defending sword like a hurricane buffets against a house. Again and again, she mercilessly attacked him, sending him stepping backwards slowly, again and again, attacking and attacking, never knowing anything save for the battle—not even her own endurance.

Yet as Beatrix had managed to escape from a similar madness before (with Freya), so too did Iudicium escape this. He received a single cut on the cheek before retaliating with his own weapon, clashing and smashing his sword against Beatrix's until the woman was too weak to protect herself, then cleaved at her stomach with what would have been his final blow. The attack hit her, creating a small but noticeable gash on her abdomen. Paired in with the exhaustion she had been through, and the emotional distress she had seen, the blow was just strong enough to send Beatrix to the floor. But just to be certain, Iudicium let her have it in the face.

Now, with nobody left to stand in his way, Vikar Iudicium slowly walked over to where Garnet was, and pitifully glanced down at his substitute foe. The Queen was still screaming out in untold agony, her

entire left side gushing out blood, and not even the world's most powerful spell, item, or doctor might have cured such a grievous wound. She was suffering, of course—suffering like nothing she had ever felt, even against Kuja or Necros. Her entire arm had been completely cleaved off in a single hack, leaving nothing except a bloody, empty remnant, and screams.

“Well... well... well...” With the deliberation of a king, Iudicium examined the moaning woman, and gently poked her with his sword. A kick or two completed the insult, and not even such a heinous travesty as this could spurn the Queen's protectors into performing their duties. Everyone was beaten beyond their physical limits, leaving Iudicium unscathed enough to torture the defenseless monarch.

“This is good,” he said softly, gazing down at Garnet's pained expression. “Your suffering is good, and pure. I have suffered ten times more than what you are going through even now, and over a much longer period of time. Even now, Alexandria, you do not fully comprehend the pain and agony I have been through, nor will you ever, not even in the bowels of Hades itself!

“But,” he continued as he smiled sickly, “we can certainly come close, can’t we?” Iudicium continued his thin, sadistic smile, even as he slowly raised his sword to perform another mutilating strike. Garnet, who could barely open her eyes because of the immense pain, could only whimper and hope for things to be over fast.

“Stop!!”

A powerful voice halted Iudicium’s actions briefly, causing the invader to turn around and see who had spoken. Out of the violence and chaos of the battle around him, there came a distinct *tap-tap-tapping* sound, and the deliberate yet strong footsteps of one who never knew what laid ahead of them. From the flames and smoke emerged the unidentified girl, a dark expression on her face and her walking stick in her hand. Though blind, she seemed to glare coldly at Iudicium.

“Vikar Maoska Iudicium...!” she spat. “He” smiled wickedly at her.

“Child of Nostrudamus...” The two of them stared each other down for awhile, almost as if there was some hidden past between them, which there was. “...So, my theory was correct. You *did* manage to find refuge in this castle.”

“The time for talking has come to an end, Vikar,” spat the girl. “If nobody else can stand up to you, then I will! My only regret is that I was unable to arrive when the fighting first started, but I’m going to make up for that mistake by stopping this madness!!” The smirk on Iudicium’s face ceased to be, and calmly, the girl turned her head around and smiled at her temporary aide, a young Burmecian male who was around twenty.

“Excuse me,” she said gently, “but could you do me a few favors?”

“Certainly, milady,” he said. The girl smiled, and delicately removed her dark glasses.

“Hold these for me,” she said. “I wouldn’t want to lose them in the fight. Oh, and could you exchange this walking stick for the weapon I had when I came in?”

“Certainly, milady,” repeated the Burmecian. The young male loyally kept the girl’s glasses in his pocket, and placed her staff off to the side while he retrieved another weapon. In the meantime, the young girl slowly tied her blonde hair back in a ponytail, so it wouldn’t get in her way during “the fight”. As she busied herself, anyone healthy enough

to talk did so, questioning her most unorthodox actions.

“Milady! What do you think you’re *doing*?! That’s a monster over there! Surely you don’t intend to actually *fight* him! Why, he plowed through fifteen of the finest warriors in the land, with almost no scratches on him! What do you think *you* could do?!”

Silence.

“Trust me,” she said as she tied her golden hair back. “I’ll be fine. Believe it or not, I’ve seen much worse than him.”

“But, milady...!”

“I’ll be fine,” she assured them with a smile. “Your concern should be with the injured. Ah, thank you, Morris.” The Burmecian who had been attending her—Morris—bowed his head as he handed her what appeared to be her true weapon, a very long and very powerful staff that was rumored to have been made on the moon. It was as legendary a weapon as Save the Queen, Ragnarok, Ultima Weapon, etc., and though it would not break under the stress of Iudicium’s unstoppable blade, people had to wonder whether this timid girl was sane or

not when she stepped forth to challenge the hitherto-unstoppable Iudicium.

Twirling her long staff in the air like the blades of a windmill—only with a considerably-faster speed—the girl stood in wait to see what Iudicium had in store for her. The man in white, whose smile was long gone, merely held his sword in a neutral position, waiting for the chance to strike or parry. A dark pause, thick and tense like rope, hung silently in the air as these two people squared off. Only the fires moved in the dreadful silence; even Garnet had stopped writhing long enough to watch. There was no activity, yet everyone was entranced with what might have happened next.

Suddenly, with a powerful force, the timid, quiet, shy, and mysterious young girl exploded into a ferocious blur of impossible speed, and swung at Iudicium with the power and haste of a meteor. Yet this was but one swing; perhaps a hundred-thousand more followed it, as the girl's sheer fighting speed was too much to categorize by even the fastest of eyes. Hit after maniacal hit came from her once-timid frame; her weapon sailed faster than lightning, spinning and weaving so much in the air that her weapon alone became a blur. The girl herself, who kept her eyes closed the entire time, had a look of

deadly concentration on her face as she did battle with Vikar Iudicium.

Yet his power went unquestioned, as every blurred hit from her was quickly countered by him. Again and again, with such speed that not even light itself could completely equate with it, the two struck and parried with such unimaginable force that even the skies above trembled and shot forth bolts of lightning. Flames intensified as the unknown girl and Iudicium dueled, yet even then their full power was not completely revealed.

The girl hastily flipped and tumbled into the air, almost as if she were flying and not making any leaps. The sheer amount of time she spent in the air was illogical, and all the while, her legendary staff never once ceased to strike at its foe. Again and again, the girl would vault and tumble in the air with a skill more powerful than the world's greatest gymnast, swinging and twirling her weapon at such an incredible speed that sometimes a snap would come out of the air; sometimes the weapon moved so fast that it became invisible. Iudicium, too, was swinging his weapon at an unknown speed, yet for all his previous terrors, all eyes were now focused on the girl.

Her skills were beyond incredible, perhaps even beyond perfect, and the battle would have went on for hours on end had not one of them suddenly buckled under from such a strike. Morris—no, *everyone* noted that the one doing the grimacing was Iudicium, and not the girl. She had actually *struck* him, and from the pained look on his face, she had hit him **hard**.

Yet, the battle raged on as soon as he recovered, on and on with speed and leaps and hits and blocks and so much chaos that nobody even dared to breathe. Everyone who had previously been in pain was now experiencing numbness from just watching the battle. The scene was spellbinding, and shocking, and probably even foreboding—but more than anything, it was incredible. Of course, in reality, the two of them could not keep up such indescribable feats all day long...

...Could they?

Iudicium was struck again, but not nearly as badly, but had to leap away to catch his breath. He smiled grimly at the girl, who didn't look to be exhausted *at all*. She simply held her staff in a defensive position, coldly gazing into Iudicium's direction with dead eyes. Suddenly, the earth began

to rumble, and a horrible growling sound came from behind. Iudicium briefly turned around to see what the disturbance was, and literally paled as he spotted a gigantic mutated moogle monster glaring down at him.

“...Maideen...” he hissed. “This isn’t looking too good for me...” From somewhere on the ground, a wicked chuckle could be heard; some people discovered that the laugh came from Eiko.

“How... do ya... like... that... mister?” she wheezed. Iudicium’s pale face grew dark, and he scowled at the girl and her Eidolon. Suddenly, yet another explosion rocked the whole kingdom, and from the skies above, one could hear the loud roar of one drunk on madness.

“Heeeeeeeeeey yooooooooooooooooo
guuuuuuuuys!!!!!!!!!!” shouted the drunken one. “We’re here to save the day!!!! Looks like we came just in time!!!”

“Ugh, what a sight for sore eyes,” muttered Beatrix weakly. “Steiner, if you don’t kiss that Erin, then *I* will.”

“She..... *has* saved our lives many times...” managed the knight. Beatrix smiled weakly as Erin

and the crew of *Hilda Guarde 5* waved down at them, cannons ready to fire at a moment's notice. Iudicium scowled fiercely at this new development, and let out a curse.

“...Blast.....! Well, I'm not so foolish as to not know when I'm outclassed, so if you'll excuse me, I'll be leaving now. But heed my words, Alexandria! Your suffering does not end today!!!” And with that, the madman waved farewell, and hoisted his hand in the sky for a passing Harpy to catch. The last they ever saw of him was the white clothes he wore, and then, nothing.

Once the terror was gone, the girl took a deep breath, and gazed into the sky.

She slowly opened her dysfunctional eyes, revealing a pair of golden orbs resting in her sockets.

And then, just as suddenly, the girl crumbled to her knees, wheezing and perspiring terribly. As if a spell had suddenly lifted up off the kingdom, everyone else resumed groaning and screaming from their own injuries, even as the soulless golem army left the area to follow their master. Dr. Quban was quickly called to attend to Garnet's wounds, and most every available white mage, cleric, or doctor

was called for everyone else. The girl's assistant, Morris, rushed over to see if she was okay.

“Ma’am?! Miss! Are you all right?” Through heaving gasps of breath, the golden-haired (and golden-eyed) lady assured him that she was fine.

“Yes, I’m... all right..... Hahaha... Sorry to worry you, Morris. I... just... overexerted myself, that’s all... ha... ha... ha.....”

Watching Dr. Quban scurry around was perhaps the most hilarious and depressing thing that anybody had ever seen: hilarious because s/he ran just as a Qu would, and shouted so many garbled orders that one couldn’t help but laugh; depressing because of the situation that Quban had been thrown into. It seemed as if all of Alexandria was groaning in painful agony, perhaps none more so than Queen Garnet, who had suffered one of the worst wounds of the recent invasion.

It had taken everything the kingdom had and more to heal the Queen as best they could, and even then, she was still missing an arm and about a liter of blood. The poor girl had screamed all the way from the streets to the infirmary, and it was only

through the grace and skill of dozens of excellent doctors that she had made it this far. The severed stump had to be operated upon, cured, healed, and sterilized, while the Queen was pumped with as many drugs as necessary. She was now out like a candle, dozing quietly but painfully, a team of doctors still working around her. The severed limb was a lost cause; at almost eighteen years of age, Garnet had been deprived of a body part. She would have to go through the rest of her life with only one arm.

But while Alexandria's best doctors attended to the Queen, everyone else had to scramble to cure the other victims of Iudicium's rage. Countless bodies were piled in the operation room, and though most every single one of them lived, they had all been shredded apart by a masterfully-wielded blade. Even the greatest of warriors had dozens of scars over their bodies, and only a small portion of characters made it out with only a few bruises.

All of Tantalus, save for Lani, had been placed inside a room reserved for those who had been injured, but not so much that they would need expert medical attention. Cinna, Marcus, and Blank had merely gotten beaten and not cut, so they were very close to being released from the overcrowded

hospital. Baku, Ruby, Genero, and Benero tried cheering them up, and even though things seemed their grimmest, the members of Tantalus still managed to goof off a little.

“Man!” exclaimed Marcus. “What a day, huh? It’s like a madhouse out there!”

“For real,” agreed Blank. “But hey, I’m just glad that that Iyoo-whats-his-name went easy on us. At least we can still walk.”

“Yeah,” nodded Cinna. ‘But hey, there’s one among us who wasn’t hurt at *all*.’ The three Tantalus “brothers” turned their attention towards the unidentified blonde who was resting in a bed not too far away. It was true that she escaped Iudicium’s wrath unscathed—in fact, the only reason she was even there was because of sheer exhaustion. The poor girl, while demonstrating unfathomable skills as a fighter not too long ago, had taxed herself to her very limit, and was rushed to this room so she could rest.

Rest she did, though she expressed unworthiness for the kind treatment. Stating that her weariness was nothing compared to the grievances others had received, the girl insisted that her caretakers attend to someone else. The only person who really stayed

to watch over her was a young Burmecian who was acting as her aide.

“So,” said Marcus as he looked at the girl, “what’s your deal? How come you could hold off that guy like that while the rest of us got whooped solid?” The girl quietly stared ahead for awhile, choosing not to pleasure the thief with an answer for the time.

“...I *will* tell you,” she guaranteed. “But I’d prefer to wait for everyone else to recover. I want this news to reach as many people as possible.”

“News? What news?” Another silence filled the room. The girl turned her blind vision towards Cinna, who had spoken last, and gave him an empty stare with her topaz eyes.

“Information that I have selfishly been withholding from you ever since my arrival,” she said. “...Though when you hear it, you may not think it to be selfish. But trust me, I’ve kept it secret for a reason.” The bearded thief nodded his head slowly, and since there really wasn’t anything else for them to do at the moment, all of Tantalus laid back in their beds and began to nap.

Meanwhile, in the other room, doctors and nurses were working endless hours to heal those who bore more severe injuries. They concentrated on clerics and white wizards first, then on anyone who could use healing techniques or spells. Slowly, little by little, the wounded forces were reviving, though at the rate they had been slaughtered, it would probably take an entire week for everyone to heal up.

Steiner, who had not been seriously hurt thanks to his armor (which was now sadly skewered and slashed to pieces), was at Beatrix's bedside like a grieving brother, moaning over the fact that he could do nothing to save either her or his liege. The holy knight herself was receiving stitches for her various injuries, while several clerics pounded her with cure spells. She was just healthy enough to respond to Steiner's moan.

"Adelbert, I know how you are feeling," she rasped weakly. "I know that you're in great pain, and that you blame yourself for what happened earlier. I too feel as if there should be some blame on my part. But, let me ask you something else."

"Wh... what is it, Beatrix?" sniffled Steiner. The holy knight, sans eye patch, smiled at her comrade

as he kneaded her bruised hand.

“Did you fight to your greatest ability and beyond? Did you give everything in that fight? Did you battle as if there were no tomorrow? Did you, Steiner, perform at your best given level?”

“...Y... yes... I, I did...” Beatrix smiled.

“Then there is nothing to worry about.” Moaning just slightly, she managed to sit up without disturbing the clerics or the doctors. “I’m... tired of beating myself up for things beyond my control. I have long ago learned that if I simply perform at my highest level, then I cannot be blamed for failure. If something is out of my field of performance, and I cannot achieve it, then what little is there to gain for blaming myself?”

“Y... yes,” said Steiner weakly, “I... I see...” Beatrix smiled a beautiful smile, and placed her hand on his cheek.

“Out of all the people here... you’re probably the healthiest of them all. That blasted rusty armor of yours has saved you the trouble of an operation.” Steiner wordlessly smiled, obviously trying to hold back a tear, and there would have been a scene if Dr. Quban hadn’t intervened.

“Scuse’ me!” s/he cried. “Must get to work on others! Many-many more people hurt!” The Qu dashed past them in a blubbery blur, leaving the two knights slightly flushed from being discovered in so unusual a position. Freya, who was having her backside treated, quietly put a book she was reading away and decided to insert her two cent’s worth.

“I agree with both of you,” she said. “Steiner’s right when he says that we could have done more, but Beatrix is right as well for saying that we can’t exceed our own greatest expectations. I know that I fought even harder than I had at the last Burmecian invasion, and I poured my soul out then. Of course, I have also found many new pools of strength in this life here...” Beatrix nodded her head, apparently not quite understanding the full depth of Freya’s words.

“Even so,” said the brown-haired knight, “I can’t believe that there exists a warrior out there who is more powerful than all of Alexandria’s greatest fighters and strategists. Iudicium barely escaped with little more than a few bruises, and it was only by the intervention of Commander Erin and Eiko’s Eidolon, but we were ruined senseless.”

“Fratley always used to say to me that there was always going to be a stronger warrior out there,”

mused Freya to nobody in particular. "...And with few exceptions, I could not believe him. After I met Beatrix, though, my doubts were quelled—but even this man..."

"He is simply stronger than all of us," shrugged Steiner. "I suppose that is that. But, dear Lord in Heaven, what about that girl?!?!"

"You're right!!" snapped Freya suddenly (nearly grimacing in pain as she lurched). "How in all of Gaia do you suppose one human could have such monstrous abilities? Her speed was so incredible that it was like watching a blur, and I do believe she might have even been more powerful than our foe!!" Both Beatrix and Steiner nodded their heads eerily, and in an almost-comic fashion, rubbed their chins in the exact same manner.

"We really *should* have a talk with her once we recover," suggested the male knight. Beatrix agreed.

"...You know," she said suddenly, "my only regret is what happened during that pitiful little scenario I displayed when I saw that worthless eye patch of mine being cut in two. I..... I think it was that weak display of pathetic emotion and selfishness which caused Alexandria, and her majesty, to suffer so."

“Now that you mention it, why *did* you go crazy when that silly thing was cleaved apart?” asked Freya. “I mean, I know that you don’t really need it that much, and in my opinion you’re much prettier without it, but... you acted like you just lost your soul or something.” A pause. Beatrix stared ahead of her darkly, her hand touching the area that her patch had once covered. To feel skin and eye instead of the comforting cloth was a different experience; to know that the material was gone forever.....

“It is... a very long story,” she sighed. She turned her gaze to two of the closest people to her heart, smiled sadly, and brushed the hair out of her eyes. “...But... I think it’s high time I finally let you two in on the secret...”

“Garnet...”

Kings, by theory, should not weep, not even in times of great distress. They should be strong, and proud, and willing to go into the darkest of situations with a bold face and a tightened fist. They should approach everything as a King should, even darkness and grief, and they should never show signs of weakness.

But in that moment of time, Zidane was more of a King than any other monarch could ever claim.

Grasping his beloved's only hand, he freely allowed the tears to fall as he wept her name out aloud: Garnet, Garnet, dear Dagger, beloved Sarah...

"This isn't happening," he moaned quietly. "This... this is not happening... Garnet... no..." Too petrified to even speak, Zidane merely placed her unresponsive hand on his cheek, and allowed the gentle palm and fingers to caress his face, like they would have done if she was still conscious. Queen Garnet was alive but hardly well; she was hooked up to a very primitive machine that kept her vitals stabilized, and a horde of doctors were constantly buzzing around her, especially the place where her left arm once hung. Over the confusion and the haunting sounds of her shrill breath, Zidane let tears come out.

"My Garnet..." he wept. "My Dagger... my beautiful jewel, my brilliant, gorgeous jewel... My... canary..." More and more tears came out from his endless cistern of sadness, so much so that they moistened her bare arm. Garnet was sleeping in pain: her face was still contorted, like her soul screamed in the body's stead, and the touch of her hand was chilling. The girl was suffering greatly, with no peace to claim for her, yet for all her misery and physical handicap, Zidane could not get over the

thought that she was and would always be the most beautiful girl ever.

And so, he stayed by her side like a King should, despite his own “minor” injuries.

Days passed before anyone was declared healthy enough to move around. The room formerly occupied by Tantalus and the unknown girl was becoming more and more crowded, as more and more people filled its beds. Many of them just needed to rest from their operations; some were almost well enough to move around again. The scars that remained were small and pinkish, almost unnoticeable, and definitely healed up. Quban, and everyone under the watchful eye of the Qu, had done magnificent jobs.

But now, it was time for answers.

Gathered around the blind girl was everyone who had been cleared from the intensive care medical ward, in which only Garnet and a few others remained. It had taken a lot of persuasion to tear Zidane away from Garnet, and even then, he insisted that his beloved wife be wheeled into the room with him. The King’s request was granted, and soon, not a soul was absent from the large resting room. All eyes were focused on the young woman that

Amarant had brought in a week or two ago, but she looked ready to answer their questions. Requesting that none of them interrupt unless it was crucial, the girl began to clarify everything that had hitherto been a mystery.

“My name is Cassandra,” she began. “As most of you might have noticed, I’m not exactly a normal girl. Physically, I am just like any normal human girl, except that I have a blindness in my eyes, but I do not refer to physiology when I claim difference. For starters, as some of you may have noticed, both of my eyes are a very unnatural and rare color: gold.” And to prove it, she removed her dark glasses and showed everyone the hue of her eyes. They were gold, all right, as topaz as bullion.

“But even this is but a small example of how unusual I truly am,” she continued. “I don’t know how I’m going to say all of this, so please bear with me if I get repetitive or if I drone on....To begin with, my difference lies in my extrasensory perception—my... *psychic* powers, if you will. Yes... I am one of the very few individuals in the world that can claim to have psychic abilities.

“This would then explain many subsequent things, such as how I knew of Iudicium’s invasion,

and other miscellaneous things. I consider this an irony: my sight is gone, yet I can see more in the span of five minutes than many of you ever will in your lives. Of course, my abilities are not perfect. For example, I require a walking stick and an aide everywhere I go, and I thank God that Morris was able to escape Burmecia and make it here without being detected.” She then flashed her aide a smile, and cleared her throat with water before continuing.

“Iudicium was one of the few people in the world that knew of my powers,” she said. “He figured that my abilities would eventually lead to his defeat, and I think he was right, hence the bounty he placed on my head. It might have been fate that saw Mr. Coral and Mr. Hunter, both loose allies of Alexandria, to find me moments before Iudicium’s invasion. I suppose that it was good that I was found. Had I been left to my own devices, Iudicium would’ve been free to do as he pleased with this kingdom.

“...My powers remain mostly suppressed, and only come out at random and uncontrolled intervals,” she said softly. “But sometimes, they can escalate beyond anything the human imagination can conceive, which may explain how I was able to fight off such a man. I have heard of prophecies that point out a ‘child with eyes of gold who will smash the

skull of Death and bring order to Chaos', and this probably refers to me. I can tell you, though, having all these problems on my shoulders isn't an exciting experience, so you'll forgive me if I'm distant or depressed most of the time.

"Being a psychic is a horrible existence," continued the girl. "I have been plagued with nightmares far worse than Iudicium's recent wrath, and in much closer and more intense proximities. I guess you could even say that a few towns fell because many were too doubtful to believe what I had to say, but I can't blame them. Only a person with a kind heart and an open mind would heed my words—after all, I am but another Cassandra." Again, the girl paused for a water break, allowing everyone in the room to absorb what she had to say. Before any of them could think about it, however, she continued.

"I'll admit that not all of my skills are due to psychic powers," she said with a humble smile. "I'm very well-trained in the martial arts, so despite this frail-looking body you see, I'm actually quite tough. The, ah, weapon you saw me using against Iudicium was a legendary tool forged from the ancient Lunarians, a race that has been in hibernation for thousands of years.

“I do apologize for coming to the battle scene so late,” she said sadly, “but it could not be helped. The whole kingdom was swarming with unholy golems, and it took a lot of my time to ward them off. I regret not coming quickly enough to do anything about Queen Garnet’s situation, so I can only beg for forgiveness. I must also apologize for keeping so much information away from you all, but you must realize that if there had been an eavesdropping spy in the area, they would have given this information to anyone with a big enough wallet. Besides, nobody is meant to know that much about their future, and what I told was just enough for you to survive on. Please, everyone, please forgive me.

“...By the way,” she added after a pause, “Amarant is not affiliated with any of the invasions, recent or otherwise. His information came from other sources, mostly Mognet Central or Lindblum, though I do admit that this most recent one came from me. Please, don’t blame him or the Hunter for any of this. Your enemy lies elsewhere.

“Well, I suppose that’s all I have to say. My throat’s a little sore from all this talking, so if you don’t mind, I’d like to rest for awhile. Please, if you have any questions, you should either ask Morris or write them down for future reference. I’m not in any

condition to answer anything yet....Thank you, for listening to my madness. Your audience and your friendship are more dear to me than the greatest treasures or the richest comforts.”

And with that, the girl sat back in her bed and pulled her dark glasses over her dead eyes. She turned a deaf ear to the world as she slowly went to sleep, and even with her abilities, she could not help but wonder what the next day would bring.

To be continued...

10. Trials

Part Ten: Trials

Standing just outside the moat of Alexandria castle was a young woman, frail and quiet in temperament, yet with a definite power lurking inside her body that few other people could possibly understand. This woman had the power to shift the very tide of war itself—she could bend and twist fate to her own liking, could peek into the forbidden future, and could foretell events yet to pass. As she stood there, in the field of grass that surrounded Alexandria kingdom, she kept her eyes closed and listened to the wind blowing against her body.

The long golden hair that flowed past her shoulders was tickled and tossed in the gentle wind, giving off the faint impression of a sea of liquid gold. The girl spread her arms out slightly to touch the gusts of wind flowing past her body, and breathed in the scent that it carried with it. The smell of blood was only faint in this breeze; it ushered in peace, and tranquility, and adventure, and great deeds. This wind was not violent; it stirred men's

hearts into bravery, and women's souls to wonder, and it made countries great.

The woman, wearing a green robe tied with a sash, allowed the wind to play with her body as she breathed in the scent. Her eyes may have been dead, yet she would not need them to absorb such a simple pleasure. A faint chill, just a faint one, was hidden in this gust, just enough to indicate that autumn would be coming along shortly. The woman felt the chill but kept her bare arms spread out, and despite such burdens on her shoulders, she smiled.

"...My lady?" came a voice from behind her. The young woman turned around and smiled as she recognized it to be her aide. "...My lady, we are ready to go whenever you are," he told her. She nodded her head.

"All right. I was just taking a few moments for myself. It had been very chaotic in these past few weeks, hasn't it?"

"Very, milady," answered her aide. "Now, if you're ready...?"

"Yes, of course," she said with a smile. "So sorry to keep you waiting." The woman followed her aide for awhile, but paused suddenly as if a hidden force

was keeping her back. She turned her head to look back at the field she had been standing in, towards the distant mountains and breeze...

“Is there something wrong, milady?” asked her aide. A silent pause followed.

“...No... I just felt something, that’s all...”

“A premonition?” Another pause.

“You could say that. I... I feel that there’s going to be great trials in store for the people of this kingdom. Two people in particular stand out to me as those who are destined to suffer the most from the upcoming crucible.”

“Really? Who?” Another pause. The lady concentrated on her feeling, but lost it as the winds carried it away into the atmosphere.

“...I shouldn’t say,” she replied. “Besides, the future is unclear. Even my powers are not completely certain. In any case, we’re going to be late if we don’t move.”

“...Right,” said her aide with a smile. “This way, milady.” He took her hand into his own, and led the blind girl towards the airship docks, where she would board one of the many vessels and head

towards her next destination. As she walked into the docks, a prayer escaped her lips, and was sent flying with the passing wind.

Please, O Creator of all worlds, guide the bodies, minds, hearts, and souls of these brave people. Give them your strength, your wisdom, and lead them not into ruin, but allow them to shine forth like stars, and to arrive home in safety and revelry. And... dear Creator, may peace rest upon this war-weary land. It deserves it so much.

The girl was never seen in Alexandria again.

The time—Two weeks after Iudicium's invasion

The place—Alexandria Kingdom, under repairs

The players—Cassandra, a beautiful young lady gifted with psychic powers, and the people of Alexandria her prayers went out to

Status—War

A more mature King and Queen stood before the gathered masses, gazing at all those who pledged allegiance to the throne and to those who sat on it. There were so many people gathered there that the

number was immeasurable; all of them had assembled at that very point, for this very speech. Both the King and Queen, burnt and molded and forged through the flames of countless wars and deaths, gazed back at their subjects with cold hard determination.

Zidane had matured more than any of them there. He had gone from a spunky young thief with no more cares than a dove in the sky, to a serious and sophisticated young man, slightly deprived of innocence. This last attack, more than any others, had stolen some joy from his life, and had made him grow up beyond his limits. The Queen, lacking an arm, was much more adult now as well, though she had gone through physical pain as well because of the mutilation she suffered. Now, though, they were both strong enough to rally their people.

Playtime was over. It was time to declare war.

“People of Alexandria!” began Zidane. “We have been through some of the most terrifying attacks that any kingdom can dare lay claim to, and yet through our own strength and perseverance, we have survived! We continue on, stronger and stronger, and we push forth to create a better and

better world, through the use of peace—and, when necessary, through the use of war!!!

“All of you have gathered for this one single moment—not to hide behind walls, not to wait for the enemy to arrive, and certainly not to cower and defend yourselves! No! Now the time has come for us to attack! No longer will we sit idly by as the villains of the world march over our lands! It is time to take back what we have lost, and to dish out some devastation of our own!!”

“The ground quakes under the advancement of our armies!” shouted Garnet. “Our enemies flee in terror from the sight of the Alexandrian banner! Our Generals strike fear into the hearts of our foes! We are unstoppable! We are unstoppable! We will attack, attack, attack, always attack, and never cease, never relent, never stop, until the flames of war have at last died down!

“We are among the proudest nations of the world! Our army is indestructible! Our soldiers are brutally loyal and will march into Hell if ordered! We will fight on the land, and on the sea! We will fight in the air, and underneath the ground! We will fight in our homes, on our streets, up on the rooftops, through the alleyways, across the

meadows, up on the tops of the mountains, and back down into the lowest valleys!”

“The Heavens cry out from the clanging of our swords!” shouted Zidane. “Our shields are at our sides, strengthening our bodies and souls for whatever perils await! Our hearts are one, strong and unstoppable! Our minds are sharp, and forever true! Our bodies are powerful, quick, fast, and ever-loyal! Our souls, invincible, and forever active, even as the body degrades! Fight! Fight, Alexandria, fight with your very soul!

“The enemy cowers under the trembling of the earth! The enemy runs and hides from the judgment we pour out! The enemy wishes for speedy death, and shall find it only too easily from the advancement of our troops! Forward, Alexandria, forward into battle, and into destiny, and into legend!!!”

“We are unstoppable!” shouted Garnet, and her closest knights all raised their swords in the same chant. “We are unstoppable, we are unstoppable, we are unstoppable!!”

“Forward into the flames of battle; the enemy does not have a prayer!” shouted Freya.

“We shall emerge victorious or we shall not emerge at all!” boomed Steiner.

“It is by the sacred laws that which we will conquer our oppressors!” cried Lani.

“Time to feast on the souls of those who stand against us!” boomed Quina.

“We shall have no mercy, no forgiveness, no stagnancy, no remorse!” shouted Makoto.

“Let’s go massacre those rotten stink-savages! We’ll butcher them!” screamed Eiko.

“R-right! All for one and one for all!” declared Vivi.

“The Creator of this world is smiling down on us, goading us towards victory!” declared Beatrix.
“Under such a watchful eye, how can so many who are so loyal and strong ever hope to lose? How else can we be anything, except for invincible?! Together, we can—no, we WILL win!!”

“Hurrah! We’ll show them what happens when you mess with us!” cheered the Tantalus gang.

“No mercy... no quarter... expect only Death to knock upon your doors!” growled Amarant.

“I pity the poor fools who stand up against such might!” laughed the Hunter.

“For all those killed, for all those suffering, for all who are defenseless, and who have no protector! For those we lost, for those we gained, and for those yet to live! WE SHALL CONQUER ALL!!!!” cried Garnet. Zidane stood proud and tall, and declared the very last battle cry.

“Victory... or Death!!!!!”

And with a shout mightier than all the elements of nature combined, the armies gathered there stormed forward, their blood exploding with adrenaline and savagery and honor and a billion other powerful emotions. The armies screamed and shouted out as they separated, some boarding airships, others taking boats, still others preferring to use land vehicles, or even their own feet. Dozens and dozens of companies filed out of the castle, storming out like the dogs of war that they were, and set out upon the enemies who so dared to defile their lands.

It was indeed a call to war. War, WAR, it was a call to war!!

The young blind woman, Cassandra, held on tight as the vessel she was on lifted up high into the air. She, too, had a role to play in this big conquest, although it might not have involved any actual fighting. No, hers was a different role—the kind that a person would eventually take after all the fighting ended, and when peace descended on the land again, and it was time once again to rebuild. It was going to be up to her to make peace, and to restore the grieving land, and to heal those hurt.

But for one fleeting moment, she would've given anything to be down there with them.

“Knights of Pluto!!! ASSEMBLE!!!!!!”

Nothing.

“*Confound it!!!!*” cursed Steiner. ‘Not again!! What could *possibly* be the problem NOW???!?’ Muttering angrily to himself, mostly about how “it had better not be another one of their ridiculous excuses”, Steiner marched down the stairs and peeked into the Knight’s room. To his mild surprise, the place was empty (save for the Moogle that hung out there), so he closed the door, rubbed his chin, and thought of where else his ignoble men could be.

“Those scoundrels!” he barked. “How dare they do this to me! They were there at the rally just like I was! They heard their Majesties’ declaration! They should have already been prepared! Now we’re going to be late again!!!”

“Something the matter?” came a familiar voice from down the hall. Steiner turned around to see a slightly-amused Freya walking towards him. In response to her dumb question, the armored man leaped up and down like an angry frog.

“YES, something’s the matter!” he snapped. “My blasted soldiers haven’t come by yet! And after I told them to be prepared and everything! The sheer audacity of those ingrates! I ought to expel every single one of them from the knighthood!”

“Then, where would you be?” she asked. “If the Knights of Pluto are disbanded, wouldn’t you be out of a job?”

“I—” Steiner’s words got caught in his throat, and refused to come out no matter how hard he tried. The knight grumbled, but knew that Freya was right. Unless he wanted to be a one-man company, Steiner would have to keep his lackeys, for better or for worse.

“...I see your point,” he sighed. “But... those nimrods have really outdone themselves this time! They could have at least *tried* to come out when I called!” Freya, whose amusement had fallen when she saw just how serious Steiner was, decided to play the supportive friend and loaned him her thoughts.

“Hmm... is there any way I might be able to help you?”

“Not unless you know where those fools are,” mumbled Steiner as he hung his head. Freya shrugged apologetically.

“Sorry. I’ll ask around for them, though.” Steiner let out a gusty sigh, and mumbled out his thanks to the dragoon as she left him. He honestly didn’t know what he was going to do with those bumbling fools of his. He couldn’t fire them, yet he hated the way they were always tardy like this, or when they goofed off, or didn’t take their work seriously. And Steiner had been assigned to investigate Conde Petie for clues concerning Iudicium’s whereabouts! He **HAD** to have his men!!

“...Confound it!” he cursed again. “I ought to ring their necks for this...”

“Steiner? Steiner, are you there?” Steiner stood up straight and made sure he didn’t look so morose, for he had heard Beatrix calling his name. With a sigh, he called out to her.

“Yes, I am here.” Beatrix could soon be seen filing inside the room—with all eight of the Knights of Pluto behind you.

“There you are, Captain!” shouted Blutzen. “We’ve been looking for you!”

“You’ve been looking for *me*?!” he blurted. “I’ve been looking for YOU!! Where the devil have you clowns been?!” All eight of the knights moaned and hung their heads in shame, but only Weimar stepped forward.

“We’re awfully sorry to worry you like that, Captain,” he said. “But we really have a good reason this time, honest!!”

“One that does *not* involve piece’a, girlfriends, cookies, socks, cockroaches, oil slicks, shaved moogles, toilet paper, *or* a lack of clothing??”

“Urrrk, no,” they moaned, surprised that he had remembered each and every one of the earlier incidents. “It’s really legitimate this time, really it

is!” Steiner gave his knights a suspicious look, but they all insisted innocence.

“Just listen to them, Steiner,” insisted Beatrix. He sighed and agreed to her terms.

“All right. What’s this marvelous reason of yours?” Smiling meekly, the knights stepped forward and thrust a box into Steiner’s arms. Quizzically, he looked from the box and to his knights again, not knowing what was going on.

“Eh? What’s this?”

“It’s your birthday present!” exclaimed Mullenkedheim. “You didn’t think that your own Knights of Pluto would forget your birthday present, did you?!” Steiner suddenly jerked back in surprise, and instantly felt his anger and his pride shrink down into microscopic proportions. He felt embarrassed enough to crawl into a sewer and die. They had remembered his birthday! They had actually remembered!

“You mean, all this time, you’ve been out getting me a *present*?!” he shrieked. The men nodded their heads.

“Yeah,” said Laudo. “I mean, you’re our Captain! No matter how much you rag on us, we’re always

gonna think that you're Number One!" Steiner smiled brilliantly, and nearly broke out in tears, he was so overcome with emotion. These men had given up time and money to buy him a present, and here he was, yelling and threatening them like a drill sergeant!

"...Ach, I don't deserve this!" moaned Steiner. "You guys are too good to me! Please, take it back! I don't deserve the honor!"

"Please, Captain?" begged Kohel. "It'd mean a lot to us if you took it!" Steiner sighed, thanked his men, and opened the box. Inside was a small little something from each of the men: a recipe for gysahl pickle soup, polish for his armor, his favorite book, an excellent flint for his sword, some nice clothes, a strong fishing rod, and a bottle of champagne.

"This is... too much," wept Steiner as he beheld his gifts. "...I love you guys!" The big goof bawled, and apologized for getting angry at his men. Blushing faintly, Beatrix stepped forward, and made note that the champagne had not been the Knights' idea, but *hers*. Steiner, poor loveable Steiner, regarded her with..... "*interest*".

"...Eh? You bought this?"

“Well, ah, I mean, because you got me something so nice for *my* birthday!” managed Beatrix with a weak smile. Steiner gazed at her coolly, and lifted the bottle up. It was a very nice, very old, and very expensive brand, the type that could only be found in Esto Gaza those days.

“Thank you,” whispered Steiner gently. “...I, ah... well, uh, I, uh... hope to, uh..... put it to good use...”

“Captain!” whistled Dojebon. “You dog!!!!” The Knights of Pluto cheered Steiner on, leaving him and Beatrix red as cherries, and would have egged the two on forever if their Captain hadn’t shut them up.

“...Ahem! Attention!!!!” The soldiers quickly snapped to attention, leaving Steiner to cough and clear his throat. “.....What I have said today... is to never leave this room, understand?!”

“Yes, SIR!!!”

“Good! Now, move out, you dogs!!” Steiner ran forth towards the airship docks, with his knights filing close behind, smiling impishly as they all passed Beatrix.

“It’s good to hear Captain Steiner yelling at us again!” smiled Haagen.

“Good luck!” said Breiricht. “Hehehe, and go easy on the champagne!”

“I’m going to forget that I heard that, soldier!” snapped Beatrix angrily. “Now get moving, or else *I’ll* have to discipline you!!”

“Yikes! W-wait for us, C-Captain!!!”

Beatrix sighed, the matter of Steiner’s birthday and the Knights’ gifts slowly fading from her system. The scenario was funny and touching at the same time, but now was a time for war. Beatrix had a job to do, a mission to perform, a vow to uphold, and she would perform to the best of her abilities, as she always had in the past. And so, she made sure that she was prepared before going to the *Red Rose*.

The *Rose* was going to Esto Gaza, the land of snow and ice. Beatrix didn’t have a problem with this—she had packed warm clothes for herself, and would definitely be wearing them as she explored the distant northern regions. She didn’t expect to find anything in a place so cold as Esto Gaza, but then again, nobody save Cassandra knew where Iudicium’s base was, and the young girl had just left

the other day. Nobody could understand why she didn't tell Garnet or Zidane where to send their troops, not even her own aide.

Then again, the future was not something that people should know. Besides, the girl's powers were never 100% perfect, and in fact, she could have had the wrong information. *Best not to chance it*, she had said. But, even then, it was plain to see that there was a secret the girl was keeping, a secret that could help or hinder the lives of thousands of people.

Oh well.

One thing in particular was somewhat unsettling to Beatrix. She had hoped that Queen Garnet would send Freya along with her, so the two could fight side-by-side, as it was meant to be. But no, the noble dragoon was on the *Hilda Garde 4*, which was going straight for the Outer Continent. Freya was assigned the task of keeping watch over Madain Sari, along with Eiko and the Vivi army; Steiner's crew was going to Conde Petie, while Quban and Quina would alert Qu marshes all over the world. The black mage village would be watched over by Makoto; Amarant's crew and Tantalus would be split between Daguerro and Oeilvert.

Beatrix could wish for eternity, yet the decision of the King and Queen was final. She could adapt to the change, as she had so many times in the future, though it would be a little depressing to be away from Freya for so long. Even after all this time, Beatrix still felt like she was just now getting to know her childhood friend, and the same was expressed by the dragoon. It was obvious that the two made a brilliant pair, and to separate them might lead to disaster.

...I really should stop being such a baby about it, sighed Beatrix as she wiped the hair from her eyes. It's only going to be a month-long campaign. We're just going to split up and scour the whole world for Iudicium's base. It's not going to take that long. I can certainly be without her for a short period of time. After all, we've been separated all our lives; what more will a month do?

...Yes, I am being childish about it. Ha! The audacity! A year ago, I wouldn't have felt this way about anybody, maybe not even Luke!...And yet... Hahaha... it feels like I'm losing my sister here....I should really stop being so foolish. Freya can take care of herself. She has fought Kuja, after all, and I have not. So, really, Trixie!! Surely you know your own best friend better than that! Stop worrying!

You'll be fine on your own as well! And who knows! That girl might be wishing that you were going along with her, as well!

“Freya... you sure have been a big influence on me,” sighed Beatrix to herself as she made her way to the *Red Rose*. “Hahaha... I honestly feel like you're my little sister... and that this division we're all going through is affecting us the most....Blast. This does not become a General.”

I'll punch her for this, muttered Beatrix. *I will seriously punch her for this....Right after I give her a hug. I'll definitely want to hug her when we meet again. Well, until then, my friend. I only hope you know how much joy you've brought into my world...*

“I hope you know how much joy you've brought into my world...”

“What's that?” asked Eiko as she ran up to Freya. The dragoon shook her head free of stray thoughts and gazed down at the young summoner.

“Nothing,” she said. “I was just... thinking about somebody very close to me.”

“I'll betcha it's that Fratley guy!” smiled Eiko innocently. At the mention of her lost love, a stab of pain struck Freya's heart... but such a heart was also

strong, and had suffered more powerful blows in the past.

“...Not really,” she admitted. “Hahaha... you know, for once, that man’s not been in my thoughts... hahaha...”

“Eh? What’s so funny?” asked Eiko. Freya shook her head and knelt down to the child’s level.

“I’ll tell you later,” she smiled. “For now, I’d like to hear more about Madain Sari. I wasn’t part of Zidane’s little entourage when he visited that area, so I want to know as much as I can. I heard that Lani made that place her home before she moved in with Baku and the others.”

“Yeah, I saw her from time to time,” said Eiko. “Boy, she sure has changed! But, I guess we’ve all went through a little change in the past few years, haven’t we?”

“You have no idea...”

“Huh? Did you say something?” A pause. Freya smiled at the summoner and ruffled her hair.

“You’re a good young lady, Eiko. I fancy you’ll make one man very happy in the future.”

“Just *one*?” squealed the summoner. Freya chuckled heartily at the child’s spunk.

“...Well... you never know... If you grow and mature, perhaps you *will* have your own entourage of gentleman callers following you around!...But, anyway, let us move on. We all have so much to do, and I want to get started as quickly as possible.”

“Right! I guess I’ll seeya on the ship!” Eiko smiled and waved at Freya, then scurried away to board the *Hilda*. Freya stood up, stretched, sighed, and smiled.

“Fratley... my heart is so glad now. My spirit soars into the sky, and boundless joy runs as a substitute for my blood. You have made me happy, for whatever brief moments we had, and now... now... Yes, dear, I am still happy, even without you... So, just consider how I would feel if, by some sudden chance, I happened to join you.” Smiling to herself, Freya inhaled a deep breath of purifying air, and removed her hat. Kneeling down on the floor, she chanted an old Burmecian prayer, holding her spear straight before her as she prepared herself for the fight of her life.

Finally, she was prepared. Freya Crescent donned her hat again, and tied a ribbon onto her tail—no,

two ribbons. One was from Fratley, given to her as an engagement proposal, and the other was from Beatrix, as a sign of their bond. They had no special powers or properties, but still, a definite feeling of strength emanated from them. Taking in another breath, Freya shouldered her spear and boarded the *Hilda Guard* 4. Slowly, slowly, the ship ascended into the skies, and pattered off towards the horizon, into the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

“Well,” sighed Commander Erin as she steered the vessel, “here we go again!”

The universe was deep and dark and cold and lonely. It consisted of great, deep, dark gashes of emptiness, a void filled with nothing but empty matter and desolate darkness. It was large and great, this universe, though for the most part, it was completely void of anything at all. Only in the tiniest of all spaces was there really anything worthy to look at.

Plumbing deeper into the universe reveals the emptiness to be false. Millions upon billions of spots of light blind the senses as celestial travelers race across the infinite void. There are quasars, clusters,

and the great galaxies that hold the brightest light of them all. Some spiral around like tops, others pulsate like random waves of electricity, still others defy all reason and simply exist for the sake of existing.

Deeper still into these galaxies are systems of planets that revolve around hot spheres of gaseous fire and scorching-hot plasma. Trillions of these planets could exist in the universe itself; indeed, the numbers of worlds and systems in this certain galaxy cannot be calculated. The sheer size and magnitude of everything is overwhelming; at best, to contemplate it all would mean mental meltdown.

Further still, as if driven by madness, there can be discovered small worlds being hurtled around the sun like a sling. These planets come in unlimited sizes, and unlimited colors, some defying definitions held for countless seconds. Only a select few of them might be placed so fortunately in the grand scheme of things that they may bear life; one in particular catches the eye.

Further still, into this habitable planet, there are continents, home to dozens of individual countries that form alliances and stab backs and wage wars and give peace without ever realizing that they are

but dust in the universe. Further still, one country out of many is examined, and even here there are divisions; buildings and territorial boundaries stand out as if nothing else is more important, while the universe lives on coldly.

Diving in further, one building stands out more than others. Even here, there are distinctions—it is as if there is some ghastly pattern that is being followed, and from universe to common rooms of a building, that pattern has persisted since. In the darkness of chaos and the light of simple electrical bulbs, buildings are divided into rooms and one room out of so many trillions of rooms from so many trillions of worlds is sorted out.

From universe to quasar to cluster to galaxy to system to planet to continent to country to district to building to room, a journey has subtly been made, and now that the journey to the individual room has been completed, it is now time to learn why this particular room out of so many others is different. There is a reason, but in a very small way, it is not different at all. Perhaps in another universe, this very same scenario is happening, possibly even at the same time, though the two are separated forever.

Freya Aphrodite Crescent was taking that very moment, that very moment in time and space, to think about things. Her thoughts were on all three of the spectrums of time—the past, present, and future—and every one of these periods proved to be a good source of thought. It was by the past which Freya learned from, the present which she lived for, and the future that she prepared for. It was this, this single Burmecian-turned-Alexandrian entity, this dragoon known as Freya, who stood poised on the brink of history and spent such a period in thought, even as she stood poised on a completely different brink, that of the *Hilda Guard* 4's port side.

As the airship lifted up, Freya's thoughts drifted from past to present and into the future, but became more and more random as the vessel lifted off of the ground. Her immediate concerns were with the present, of course. Little was going on there except for the launching of the *Hilda*. For this moment in history, Freya needed only to prepare herself for liftoff, and make sure she could handle the sudden thrust.

The past had ways of sneaking up on her, but she allowed such an intrusion. Even after all this time, she still found it rather difficult to believe that it had only been a year or two ago when she and Beatrix

were still considered enemies. Had it only been that long ago? It seemed that a lifetime had passed her by since those dark days—a lifetime, and more scars than she dared to count. The mere thought of being enemies with Beatrix now was sickening.

Of course, it had not always been like that. The two warrior-women, as unbelievable as it sounded, really were once bitter enemies. Beatrix had invaded both Burmecia and Cleyra, and assisted in slaughtering the innocent population for crimes unknown. Like a thief, she had stolen the Cleyran's crystal and left the town up to Brahne's destructive desires. It was true that Beatrix partially redeemed herself later on, and the redemption had become complete when she stormed into the occupied city of rain and freed it single-handedly, but there had still been a great enmity between the knight and the dragoon.

But over the course of time, events and scenarios caused the two enemies to bond together in ways they never considered. Madness, death, desperation, and horror forced the two enemies to befriend each other, and together they would huddle until the storm passed. But oh, it had been worth it! It had been worth every single moment, every painful moment, and more so, a thousand times over!

Because of their willingness to bond, Freya and Beatrix unearthed a long-kept secret, and discovered their true heritage—not as enemies, but as sweet and innocent childhood friends, who had been driven away by the very things that would one day bring them back together again.

It was the stuff myths were made of, but all of this was very real to Freya. Oh, how much time had passed her by since those dark days!! Had it really been that long ago when she had contemplated suicide, only to be saved by the very woman she “hated” most of all? Had it been so long ago when they were not friendly to each other? Had it been that long.....?

Freya smiled to herself. It really was unbelievable.

Now, though, there was a future to consider. And as dark as the past had been, it was but a shadow compared to the nightmare that awaited the two warriors. For though they had seen strife and trouble “back then”, it really was nothing next to what was going on now. The good King and Queen of Alexandria, after reeling from the worst attack on the kingdom in eons—possibly ever—had just recently declared war on the very foes that had

recently laid siege to the kingdom. They launched a full-scale attack, an all-out offensive against the single foe that had caused them such misery for so long.

The forces of Alexandria, since they had no idea where to start looking, had been split up into several groups, and had been dispatched all throughout the world. Some went to Daguerro, others Oeilvert, others Ipsen's Castle, still others would go to the unnamed islands and small patches of land that rested out beyond the boundaries of the Mist Continent (somebody really needed to rename that place). A large part of the Alexandrian force would even scour the continent itself, for there was a strong possibility that such a foe existed right next door.

Freya was part of the small convoy that had been dispatched to the Outer Continent. Along with Eiko, Mikoto, and a few others, she would scour the large northern land in search of any clues of Iudicium's whereabouts. Madain Sari, the Black Mage Village, Conde Petie, the sunken Desert Temple... anyplace could have been the hideout of their detestable foe. Freya was at least grateful that she had been assigned to a reasonably warm place; poor Beatrix had to go to Esto Gaza. Freya *almost* chuckled at her

dear friend's predicament, but in war, laughter was a rare luxury.

Taking a deep sigh, Freya breathed in the fresh air of the outside world as the *Hilda Guarde 4* took to the skies. The increasing whir of the airship, followed by the sudden rush of air and the scent of lubrication and machines, gave Freya a stirring feeling inside her body. It was weaker than adrenaline, but even Eiko could tell that the older lady was psyched up for a fight. Still, the airship had a long way to go before she arrived at Eiko's home.

"Are you really ready for this?" asked the small summoner. Freya, who had been lost in her own world ever since the beginning of the flight, finally snapped free from her daze and glanced down at Eiko. She smiled warmly, which was becoming easier and easier to do, and placed her furry hand on the girl's head.

"I detest war," she said in a slightly-philosophizing tone. "It takes away everything you love and perhaps even your own self. Yet there are rare times that I feel more alive and excited than in the heat of battle. My dear lady summoner, I do abhor what is happening now, but the very essence of fighting—pitting one's lifelong skills against

another opponent—this, Ah, is what I live for!...So to answer your question, yes.”

Poor Eiko gave Freya a confused look.

“Uhh... gee, I was just wondering...”

“I apologize,” chuckled the taller woman. “I do sometimes go off into a nonsensical tirade of personal feelings every once in awhile. Perhaps this very moment in time has caused me to reflect on things, more so than I usually do.”

“Yeah, you’re just like a big mirror,” replied Eiko. “You’re always reflecting on something. But mirrors also show us what our own selves look like.” Freya smiled wryly at Eiko’s wisdom and regarded the child with a cool stare.

“Seems I’m not the only one who has words of wisdom to say.”

“Oh, stop it!” chuckled the child. ‘That was just some strange writing I read in a play once. You know I could never make any of that stuff up myself!’ Freya smiled at Eiko’s childish ways, but had to admit that the girl could be awfully mature when she wanted to. She... fondly remembered just how “mature” Eiko was back in the days where Garnet was still a Princess and Zidane still a thief.

To see the flirtatious boy get a taste of his own medicine was truly a sight, and worth every chuckle that Freya spent.

“Anyway,” resumed Eiko after a pause, “I don’t know you that well, but I wanna wish you good luck. Freya, I haven’t seen the terrors of war like you have—”

“Not that you should,” interrupted the dragoon. Eiko nodded her head and agreed.

“Right. I don’t *want* to see the true face of war, but it looks like I’ll have to. Garnet and I are the only summoners in the whole world, unless she has a baby. Oh, you think Garnet will be expecting a child anytime soon?”

“(With the way Zidane is, I’m surprised she doesn’t have a few already),” muttered Freya. Eiko didn’t hear the comment and asked Freya to repeat herself; the dragoon coughed it away, said it was “nothing”, and asked if there was anything Eiko wanted of her services.

“Not really,” replied the little mage. “But hey, promise me you’ll fight well. Beatrix and the others will be sad if you come home injured... or if you don’t come home at all...”

“I do not believe the God of this world would allow me to die after everything I have seen,” said Freya flatly. “If I am granted Death, and I do not think I will just yet, I pray it is either very far away in the future, or else in the heat of a very intense battle. You do not need to worry.” Eiko nodded her head again, and excused herself from Freya’s presence. The dragoon sighed, and chastised her own self for such words.

Listen to you, she thought. You’re either starting to sound like a mother, or else an overconfident warrior—or, should I say, you’re starting to sound like Beatrix.

Freya just had to laugh out loud as she considered that.

The long hours passed, and the time for laughter, reflection, and even thought itself had passed. The *Hilda Guard 4* was about to make a landing on the Outer Continent, so it was time to gear up for battle. This reality became even more grim as the pilots and crew realized that there was already a great battle scene below them. A great and glorious massacre was spread out on the beaches and fields of the

continent, with the armies of darkness locked in lethal combat with the forces of good.

“My word!” exclaimed Freya. “There’s got to be thousands of them down there!”

“Do you think they’ve found Iudicium’s fortress?” asked Eiko. Freya shook her head warily.

“I don’t know... But we’d better get down there and fast. Who knows how many lives have already been lost.” Eiko nodded her head, and the two jumped ship to preemptively join the battle. Explosions of magic rocked the very ground, and the heavens thundered under the march of cavalry and infantrymen. Freya had been in battles before, but nothing like the full-scale war going on right then.

Flaunting her spear to the world, Freya merged herself into the battle, and began her chaotic struggle for existence with a single swish. The creature she struck perished instantly from such a blow, and the dragoon prepared herself to extinguish hundreds, perhaps thousands of others that shared that same beach with her. This was definitely going to be a long and hard battle, yet for all she knew, this massacre before her was just an appetizer.

Fire burned the skies with an intense glow of furious flames, scorching the world with molten-hot magma and the fury of the earth's vomiting rage—in other words, the hounds of merciless war had been unleashed. Freya leaped into the battle and swung her spear around, cleaving an enemy in to and landing just slight of its remains. She ran forward, plowing through the hacked-up enemy, and rammed her weapon into another, and another, and another still, creating a gruesome shish-kabob to be cooked over such flames that the world produced when war was stinking up the land.

She flung these enemies aside and quickly turned around, using such fierce momentum to slice through yet another foe. Mindlessly, thinking only of the present moment, Freya continued her charge and leaped high into the air, twirling her spear around like the blades of an airship propeller. She reached back with her weapon, gathering more momentum for the attack, and flung it straight to the ground like a meteor. It whistled down to the ground and cruelly split yet another foe in twain, impaling them instantly.

The dragoon fell down, and the very instant her feet touched the ground, she yanked her spear from out of the creature's body, twirled around, and

smashed the butt end of it into an attacker that had been charging from behind. Next, she ran through the horrifying carnage like a raging bull, shoving aside anything in her way. She charged like a jousting knight, with her spear held out right in front of her, and with a sudden ferocity, she began swinging precisely to the left and right of her, swish-swish, swing-swing, cut-cut, hack-slash, here and there, to the left and right as she charged, destroying everything that was in her way, until she came to her goal.

With her speed increasing and her weapon slaying more and more as she ran, Freya began to build up strength for the final blow. In front of her there was a dragon, as big and large as a small house, and this creature had been the cause of much strife since the battle's opening hours. Freya continued to charge it, hacking enemies everywhere her spear was thrust, until she was so close to the dragon that she could feel its body heat. With a scream, she drew her spear back and plunged it directly into the monster's belly, thrusting it in so far that even the handle vanished.

The monster let out a scream, but Freya was not done yet. Pulling out her spear with as much ferocity as she had plunged it in, she jumped high into the

air, and with a single cleave, separated the monster's head from its neck. She landed on the ground, and knelt just long enough to take one single breath of victory. Then, it was back to business.

Lightning replaced the fire, blasting apart the heavens above the massive carnage as the intense battle raged on. There was so much blood and confusion and fighting in the air that the whole thing seemed like a dream—or perhaps, a nightmare. Freya Crescent had only the war on her mind, and no other distractions at all, not even Beatrix, not even the screams of her comrades. For all she knew, she was out there all by herself. She certainly fought like that.

After taking a brief breather, she ran back into the battle, and began picking enemies off one by one. The first foe was something like a large turtle, who was invincible whenever it hid in its shell. Freya solved this problem by ramming her spear inside the tiny opening where its head shrunk in, and the beast was no more. Her next foe was a large group of werewolves, snarling and slobbering and starving to death. They all surrounded the dragoon, fangs glistening and fires in their eyes, and tackled her all at once.

Yet Freya did not allow a single scratch or bite. With the speed of a true dragoon, she exploded into action and defended her self and her honor. One of the wolves leaped after her; she kicked it aside, leaped after it, and threw her spear in its chest. Another attacked her as her back was turned; she performed an impossible frontwards flip, turned 180 degrees in midair, landed on the ground, and readied her weapon to welcome the attacker. Three more wolves dashed after her in their mindless madness, and the woman snarled right back at them before meeting their challenge.

First of all, Freya jumped right over all three of the wolves, sailing so high that only an eagle could match her. Soaring high in the sky, Freya took careful aim, and with a powerful thrust, she flung her spear down to the ground like a thunderbolt. It missed the speedy werewolves, but Freya wasn't aiming for them. When she plummeted back down to the ground, Freya positioned her body in a fashion that would allow her to grab her spear the very moment she landed, and use such momentum to hack apart anything in her path.

The split second her feet touched the ground, her hands slipped into the handle of the spear, and with a back-breaking twist, the woman yanked it out and

slammed it against the body of one of the wolves. Immediately thereafter, she took an immense swipe at the other two, and ended their lives. Yet even then, hundreds of other enemies were surrounding her, and though Eiko's eidolons were helping out a little, and the present forces were doing the very best they could, it still seemed like a hopeless fight.

"We've got to get outta here!!" screamed Eiko. "We're way outnumbered!"

"No! We stay and fight!" yelled Freya. The woman grew feral again, and jumped into another fight with more enemies than she should have been taking on. Eiko sighed and shook her head, and summoned one more beast before exhausting herself. The ground opened up, lights began flashing, and a holy energy overtook the whole land as Maideen began its massive crusade. A shockwave of pulsating power wiped clean the land, yet the more resilient enemies merely found it a stunning blow.

"Come on!" shouted Eiko over the disaster. "If we don't run now, we're gonna die!! There are many more battles than this to fight!!"

"I don't retreat until I win!" shouted Freya as she parried the attacks of an ogre. "I've been running

away for too long now! Ever since I was born, I've always been on the run, never wanting to face my fears! And what does it bring me except for years of regret?! Oh no, I'm staying here! I'm not going to leave anything to regret! To me, it has now come to two options: Victory, or Death!!!” And with such a passionate speech now filling her body with the power it needed, Freya exploded yet again into a wild frenzy of carnage and massive slaughter, and began mowing her way through the enemy number like they were nothing more than ripe wheat.

“Are you crazy?!” screeched Eiko, but from the look of Freya's battle-face, she knew the dragoon was very much in her right mind. And so, with little other choice in the matter, Eiko let out a hiss and returned to the battle, but not before letting out one final comment,

“...This is NUTS!”

Thirty minutes passed before the enemies surrounding the beaches finally retreated, but by that time, the opposing forces had been so badly beaten that their own option of retreat had almost been taken. Freya's boldness in battle might have cost several good lives; if she had retreated, as Eiko suggested, a few more people might have lived to

see another day. As it stood, the small group had a victory on their hands, albeit a very hollow and painful one.

Freya herself sat quietly as Eiko mended her wounds. The sting of battle was all around her, in terms of scars and bruises and burns, but more devastating were the inner scars, the mental injuries she had to keep forever as a reminder of her own stubborn pride and occasional foolhardy nature. It was true that she had inflicted serious casualties with her spear (and had received lots of injuries herself), but the fact remained that if she hadn't been so brash, a few more lives might have been spared.

“...It's hard, I know,” said Eiko, reading Freya's lifeless expression. The dragoon took in a deep breath and shook her head.

“I'm sorry. I seem to cause trouble wherever I go.”

“You're not perfect,” said Eiko with a strained half-smile. Freya agreed to that and winced slightly as a few more wounds healed up. Poor Eiko had taxed herself to the extreme while fighting, yet the little summoner still seemed to have enough pep left in her to heal up the wounded. On a more grim note,

the Phoenix eidolon had to be summoned quite a few times...

“Did I do the right thing?” asked Freya, mostly to herself. “I stayed in that battle and fought it out to the end. I encouraged everyone else to do the same. We did stay, and we did drive those enemies away, and we certainly proved our power. But I wonder if it was really wise of me to do that.”

“You were thinking about the time you escaped Burmecia during that last invasion,” noted Eiko. Freya stared hauntingly into the eyes of the little girl and shivered in horror. For a very long time, there was silence in the air.

“.....Perhaps,” she sighed. “That was definitely not my finest hour. I..... I guess you really could say that I was trying to make up for my cowardice back then. But... I ran from that fight and lived. What do you suppose would have happened to me if I stayed?”

“I dunno,” shrugged Eiko. “Things like that are so complicated—things like fate, destiny, chance, luck, free will... I don’t bother, though. It’s way out of my league. For now, let’s just say that you did the right thing. Self-preservation is integrated into all of us, no matter what we say or do.”

“...Agreed,” whispered Freya gently. “But... there is also honor, and the will to make up for past mistakes.”

“I suppose. Well, you’re all fixed. I’d tell you to go easy, but knowing you, and the circumstances we’re in now...” Freya smiled and stood up, and sure enough, her body was back to its usual healthy condition. Eiko sure was a wonderful little gem. It would be interesting to see which direction she took as she grew up...

“I know, I know. Thank you, Eiko. I know I don’t deserve to be healed up—”

“Aw, no problem!” smiled the girl. “We all do things we regret, and we all do things we’re proud of. Who knows, maybe your tenacity will help us in the future...?” Freya nodded her head, and took a deep breath as she gazed into the sky before her. The battle of the beach had been won, but at great cost, so she could only imagine what the subsequent fights would lead to. Would she, as a leader, perform well and give out reasonable commands? Would she retreat when necessary, or would she stay and fight regardless?

Freya certainly did have a lot on her mind, and under any other circumstance, she would have

brooded forever on all of them. Loners like her usually got lost in their own thoughts and questions, and this time was no different, but there was also a war going on. And in war, thinking and questioning are not always good ways to spend the time available...

“Well, enough standing around here,” said Freya with a sigh. “We’d better go on ahead and see if there’s any other disturbances. Come on; it’s going to be a long day.”

“You can sure say that again,” sighed Eiko as she followed close behind.

The battles only grew worse from then on out, as Freya had anticipated. It was as if the entire Outer Continent had suddenly grown infested with barbaric invaders, and it was up to a small force to eliminate such large numbers. The dragoon could only guess why the continent was so overrun with beasts—probably because this was Iudicium’s hideout, and they were “guarding” the place—so alongside her battling senses, her attention was also drawn towards anything suspicious.

Freya ran wildly into the thick of the stormy battle, her spear held before her like the lance of a jousting knight. The previous fight had given her wisdom;

she now recognized when it was best to run, and when it was best to duel it out to death. Needless to say, this very battle would be but a skirmish. There were far too many enemies for her to fight—heck, she would need a whole *army* to take them on—but the point of her presence there was not to participate in the war, but to uncover the whereabouts of her enemy’s hideout.

...Well, maybe she could fight a *little* bit...

Freya began her second great struggle for survival by swinging her spear at the first creature she saw, decapitating its head nicely while being thrown into the thick ferocity of the battle around her. In this more desperate and uncontrolled fight, the only thing she knew was her own self: the condition of her weapon as it span, poked, and sliced anything within range, the condition of her body as blood splattered over it and injuries piles up, the condition of the immeasurable screaming sounds, and the vicious noise that rose up to greet the thunders above.

Freya leaped high into the air, tumbled, and landed directly in front of a large Red Giant, by far the most threatening beast in the present army. Its sword alone was bigger than she was, and the beast’s

armor was so thick that only a legendary weapon could scratch it. Freya prepared her weapon by holding it in a defensive position with her left hand, and kept both her emerald eyes on the creature as it lumbered forward. With a sudden leap, she sailed through the sky—and was viciously swatted away by the giant’s fast hands.

She landed on the ground with a mighty SLAM, causing dirt and debris to scatter in her wake. The giant raised its foot, intending to stomp on the grounded dragoon, but she rolled away just before she could be flattened. The giant did not surrender, and continued stamping on the ground with its feet. Freya rolled aside every time, just barely avoiding the massive foot, and while she was evading this monstrous beast, she came up with a plan of counterattack.

After rolling around for a few seconds more, Freya came to a halt and laid on her back, anticipating the giant’s next attack. The foot came down on her hard, but before she could be smashed into atoms, she quickly produced her unbreakable weapon, and held it vertically over her body. The giant’s foot instantly impaled itself on the spear, and a mighty shriek came from the creature as its foot was punctured. Weaponless, Freya tackled the giant

with all her strength, sending him tumbling to the ground—and exposing the sole of his foot.

Now with the advantage hers, Freya grabbed hold of her spear and slowly began to yank it out. The monsters surrounding her were thankfully being taken care of; otherwise, she would have died long ago. With each mighty tug, her spear came sliding out of the giant's foot, millimeter by painful millimeter, making the giant howl and scream as the blade cut its flesh. Freya's muscles were taxed to their absolute limit as she yanked her weapon out—it had been buried in almost completely—but slowly, slowly, the weapon came out, and with one final terrifying pull, the spear was released again.

Without the thorn in its flesh, the giant was able to fight back. Its foot was still critically injured, and it was still screaming because of such pain, so Freya had plenty of time on her hands. The Burmecian scurried up the body of the fallen giant like a true rat, leaped high into the air, and dove down directly on the giant's throat, plunging her spear into the monster's body yet again. This time, though, was most definitely the last she would ever see of the Red Giant...

Next, after slaying the monster, Freya turned her attention to more creatures surrounding her. Taking quick note of Eiko and Mikoto, who both seemed to be faring reasonably well, the dragoon sprinted back into the violent fracas and began fighting demonically. The woman's spear moved so fast that the tip looked like it was on fire. Being coated with giant's blood only helped the illusion work more, and being struck with such a weapon certainly felt like being kissed by flame.

Freya plowed her way through a large score of smaller monsters, mostly miscellaneous in shape and form, until she got to a bigger one. She quickly spared a glance sideward, noticing that the crowd of beasts hadn't thinned much since the start of the battle, and knew that this might have been her last fight. *Okay, just get rid of this beast, then maybe five more, and call the retreat. You know you can't fight all these monsters, and it's not time for you to see your parents just yet...*

"Feel my wrath!" she screamed as she plunged her weapon into the ogre's belly. The creature froze as the blade kissed his innards, but slowly gained back his strength and confidence, and gave Freya a wicked smile. To her shock, he pulled the weapon right out of his body, flinging both it and Freya aside

like so much rubbish. The dragoon landed on her feet, assessing her new foe carefully. Sure, the ogre was injured, but from the smile on its face, it was hardly lethal.

“Guess I’ll just have to try something else,” she muttered. Freya held her spear in the classical defensive position, keeping both emerald eyes locked onto the ugly monster. It grinned at her, probably thinking she was his next meal, and stomped towards her with deadly hunger in its eyes. But Freya, who was not about to become anybody’s meal, ran towards the monster again and made a quick slice. The attack only produced a scar and a bit of blood; the monster didn’t even flinch.

“Tough little freak, aren’t you?” she sneered. The ogre grinned, but its smile soon faded in a flash of fire. Freya had swung her spear in an upwards arc, cleaving the beast’s head off along with its neck and part of its shoulder. No matter how powerful those things were, they would not survive such a mortal blow. With that out of the way, Freya raced to her next and hopefully final challenge, making sure that she only slaughtered a few more before calling the retreat.

Hack, slash, there went two. Slice, swish, cleave, another, and thwack!! One more! Freya impaled her final foe, and flung it mercilessly at the remaining legion before calling the retreat.

“We’ve done all we can here!” she cried. “Let’s go while we still can! Eiko, Mikoto, let’s retreat!”

“Gotcha!!” came a familiar voice. Freya trusted that everyone else had heard her call, so she could only hope that they took similar actions as she ran from the battle. Freya knew that this time around, it was not cowardice that prompted her escape, but intelligence. Even the mightiest commander knew when the battle was lost, and Freya was beginning to recognize her own insufficiencies and weaknesses. This battle could not be won, ergo, the retreat was the best choice to make.

I am sorry, all you brave warriors who perished because of my stubborn tenacity. I should have been the one to die. But I will not roll around in pity for long. I’ve taken that road before, and it disgusts me, so I will simply mourn for you, and swear on the very blood that is rolling down my beaten body that all of your lives shall be avenged.

...Even if I must use my own to see to it.

The long hike that followed the battle was indeed a tough one. The *Hilda Guard* 4 had landed on the beach of the Outer Continent, and Conde Petie, the Black Mage Village, and Madain Sari were all located very far away from the shores. The group marching there was considerably smaller than it had once been, thanks to the two consecutive battles that they had been through. Freya blamed herself for the majority of the losses, though it was clear that quite a few of them had been lost in that second fight.

The wind-whipped plains of the Outer Continent were mostly scored with dry, brittle earth that did not see much vegetation to it. The land was pure, though, with lots of warm sun in the summer and cold wind during the wintertime. What little bits of lush environment the continent could boast were few and far between. The place was not completely desolate: it had marshes, and of course the beach, and the forest which the Black Mages called home.

But the environment certainly made everyone feel just a little more depressed—or at least, it succeeded in making Freya feel downtrodden. Mikoto hardly ever showed emotion to begin with, though she was becoming more open, and of course Eiko was bouncy and chipper as ever. She had a good reason to be happy: she had not seen her home

in awhile, and was looking forward to going back. It never seemed to cross her mind that the place might have been overrun by monstrous invaders.

Freya's mood was comforted slightly by Eiko's cheerfulness, and Mikoto kept the older woman good company. The young Genome looked very much like Zidane, except she was obviously more feminine, and she didn't have that ridiculous smile plastered forever on her face. Freya liked Mikoto a little bit, only as much as she knew her; her relationship with Eiko was equally wobbly. It seemed the dragoon was not very close to a lot of people, but to whom she did call friend...

"You're thinking too much again!" sang Eiko merrily. Freya crossed her eyebrows in confusion and gave the little summoner a puzzled look. 'I don't even have to look at you to tell,' continued Eiko as she marched along the path. "I can hear it in your footsteps. You always walk a pace slower when you're in deep thought."

"I'm sorry," sighed Freya. "I'm usually thinking about something. It's just an old habit of mine that got started somewhere around the time when Fratley first left Burmecia. I wasn't always like this, mind

you.” Eiko turned around to face Freya formally, and gave the taller woman a cute smile.

“Don’t spend so much time thinking! Jeez, Freya! For once, just accept things as they are! Let life run its course! Don’t try to control the reigns, just make sure you’re holding on tight when the ride starts!” Freya smiled faintly at Eiko’s surprising wisdom, and had to wonder which parts were taken from a play and which parts came from her own head.

“...Ipsen to his friend, Act 4, scene 7, lines 36 to 38,” smiled the summoner as she raised a matter-of-fact finger. “Ipsen is comforting his friend, who was traveling with him for a long time. His friend thought too much as well, so Ipsen had to intervene.”

“Well, you’re quite the little scholar, aren’t you?” mused Freya. “Quoting from a play... You know, when I was your age, I was barely old enough to read the elementary stories that my auntie read to me. And here you are quoting a play!” Eiko smiled and hid a blush as she lowered her head.

“Yeah, well, I’ve been told that I’m awfully smart for my age.”

“I believe you are,” said Freya with a thoughtful smile. She walked over and ruffled the little girl’s hair, and told her that one day, she would make a certain man—or men—very happy and lucky.

“Yeah, too bad Zidane missed out!” she boasted. “Oh well, his loss!!” Freya chuckled and rolled her eyes, and promised Eiko that she would try to accept more things from then on out.

“Aw, it’s okay. You know, do whatever you want. If thinking about things makes you feel better, then by all means...!” Freya smiled and made note of the child’s advice, and the group continued their long, difficult, and lonely march towards the main cities of the Outer Continent. Their destinations would go from Conde Petie, where they would enlist the dwarves’ assistance, then on to Black Mage Village, and finally, Madain Sari. Personally, Eiko couldn’t wait to be back home, even though she knew that they probably wouldn’t be there for about a week, at the most.

“In the meantime,” she said, “I think we’ll just go for a little walk. I can only hope the worst of those fights are behind us.”

With Conde Petie before them, and quite a distance behind, the group picked up the pace slightly and prepared to confront dwarves. The sunny, warm, earthy civilization looked to be neatly intact, and unspoiled by the previous battles that Freya and the others had seen, which means that the armies had not gotten that far just yet. There would be no explaining it: even a General who used perfect finesse would be unable to leave an attacked city completely unharmed, so Freya could assume the best when she ran towards the city.

The plan was to first wait for Steiner's forces, who would come by later to rendezvous with Freya's team. The two sides would then gain the alliance of the dwarves, and later the mages and Genomes, and together, the large assembly would search the continent for Iudicium's base. At the least, they could rid it of the leftover armies of darkness that remained from the most recent worldwide invasion (the one Iudicium had orchestrated himself), but Freya was honestly praying they found something. She had so many reasons to want to fight this powerful foe... But until that moment came, she would have to be patient and ask for reinforcements.

It was a calm hour that led them to the borders of Conde Petie; perhaps, in a clichéd way, *too* calm.

The wind was weak, the sky was clear, and there was nary a sound, save for the crunching made by feet crossing the barren earth. Freya was uneasy as she slowly walked towards the city, wishing for a bird or a wandering animal or *something* to break the quiet. The silence was so overwhelming, in fact, that Eiko actually whispered when she made her next statement.

“(What do you think’s gonna happen?)” Surprisingly, Freya whispered as well.

“(Don’t know. Keep your eyes open, though. No telling what’s gonna come out.)” Eiko nodded her head, and grasped her Flute a little tighter. The silence was briefly remedied as a few nearby bushes began to rustle, and the intensity of the situation increased as the sound put everybody on alert. Freya’s fur stood on end, like a cat’s, and all eyes were focused on the bush, and the object that came crashing out of it.

Bunny.

Sighs were released as the gray rabbit hopped out, still munching a bit on the leaves he had found. Freya hissed out a curse and relaxed considerably.

“Don’t scare us like that...” Immediately thereafter, the shrubs exploded violently, and a creature broke loose from them and instantly pounced on the rabbit. It viciously tore the creature apart and devoured it in record time, screaming and roaring so loudly that it sent everyone into shock. Freya was nearly bowled over by the surprise—who wasn’t?—and now that everybody had been frightened to death by the sudden appearance of this new creature, it took ample time to observe them.

The monster was worse than a beast, something so demonic that only Hell could have produced it. It faintly resembled a cross between a kimono dragon, a bear, and a wolverine: the creature walked on all fours, with a vicious spike-covered tail swinging massively behind it. Its body was covered with bristly fur, scales, and spikes on the backside, and all its limbs bore long, nasty claws at the tip.

The head of the monster was something out of a true nightmare, however. The face was completely black, with ghastly white eyes and red marks dripping down it that could have been blood, stripes, or both. The monster’s teeth were as horrible as its claws, and a very, very faint trace of humanity could be seen on the face, albeit a grossly disfigured trace.

“My word!!” choked Freya, clinging to her spear weakly. “What *IS* that abomination?!” The monster before them growled viciously, displaying a long, black, dripping tongue amidst its razor teeth.

“I am the guardian to all things evil,” it spoke. Freya grimaced even more as the monster demonstrated its speaking abilities—the voice itself was terribly dark, wicked, evil, malignant, and altogether unholy—and the grip she had on her weapon tightened.

“You are coming too close to my master’s abode,” growled the creature again, pacing around them like a panther. ***“I have been given the pleasure of devouring and slaughtering everything that gets too close to my master’s abode, and there are no exceptions to this joy. Prepare for a feeding!!”***

“Do you have a name that which we may curse you by, demon?!” snarled Freya. The creature seemed to grin, and responded darkly.

“I am called SCOURGE!!!” Without wasting another moment, the monstrous creature with the incredibly apt name bounded forward, tackling Freya viciously before anyone else knew what had happened. It lashed at her with its teeth and disgusting tongue, and used its claws to rake across

her clothes and defenseless body. The beast's teeth snapped at her, and came dreadfully close to ripping her face off more than one time, and it was only through the massive amounts of wrestling Freya did that she was saved from such a gruesome fate.

The dragoon's powerful legs kicked the beast away, and it rolled a good deal before righting itself. Freya stood to her full height as well, gathering her weapon, her senses, and resolve back together for another round. Her body had small scratches here and there, and she stank a bit from the monster's breath, but otherwise, ready to fight.

"You shan't have such an easy victory," she said in a lethal tone. Turning her head to the others, she hissed out a quick command. "Eiko, Mikoto, get going! I can handle this beast by myself, but the rest of you need to alert Ghiott and the other dwarves! Hurry, there's no time to argue!"

"...If you insist," shrugged Mikoto, and without wasting a second, the female Genome grabbed Eiko by the hand and dragged her along into the dwarf city.

"Hey, wait! You're not just gonna *leave* her to fight that monster, are you?!"

“No time to argue,” shrugged Mikoto as she ran. Eiko growled in protest, but was unable to wrest herself from the grasp of the swift Genome. As they kicked up dust, Freya breathed out a sigh of relief, and gave the demonic Scourge a deadly gaze.

“Now, it’s just us, you inhuman monstrosity! Prepare yourself for obliteration!” The monster said nothing except for a vicious roar, and launched itself yet again upon Freya. But the dragoon was prepared this time, and leaped high into the air to avoid the strike. As she jumped, she swung her spear at the beast in an attempt to cleave it in two, but missed because of the strength of her jump. However, the beast did not go away completely unscathed, as a few of its nasty spikes were sheared off in midair.

When the two landed on the ground, they took a few extra seconds studying the other. Not a one of them was unadulterated: the creature’s claw marks were all over Freya, and she had eliminated quite a few of its deadly spikes. So, with the two of them theoretically even, they ran towards each other and dove into a full-scale massive slaughter, battling each other to the gruesome death.

Freya struck first, swinging her spear horizontally at the monster’s head as it lunged towards her. But

the beast was unspeakably fast, and used the length of its legs to grasp onto the ground beneath it and skid to a halt, just barely avoiding the swinging blade. After this attack failed, Freya ran after the beast with her hand stretched out in front of her, but the scourge hopped around in random positions, evading everything she had hoped to throw at it.

Freya observed the creature jumping around, every last bit of her concentration aimed solely at the beast. After a dozen or so hops, Scourge stopped and leered at his opponent yet again, and the battle began again.

“Perhaps you can stop moving long enough for me to hit you,” she said. Scourge’s tongue raked across its mouth in a perverse, slobbery lick, and the beast took a single threatening step towards his prey.

“Perhaps. But perhaps I shall stop moving long enough to rip your throat out!!” The demonic creature lunged at Freya again, taking her by surprise and slamming her down on the ground. Before it could make a snap at her, she quickly kicked it away, launching it into the air and sending it traveling behind her. In a flash, Freya stood and turned to meet the beast, and slashed at it before it could recover.

A loud whelping sound cried out as the beast received a bloody scar, but it came back for more in unbelievable time. It lunged at Freya like a starving dog—she instinctively raised her arm to protect herself—and grabbed hold of her forearm in a tight grasp. Claw and tooth alike dug into her flesh, and Freya let out a powerful scream before issuing her counterattack. The monster was attached to her dominant arm, so she would have to use her right in order to stop it.

With several jabs, whacks, and pokes, she managed to bully the creature off before he could tear any more of her flesh apart. As the beast dropped to the floor, most of its head bruised and ripped apart by Freya's weapon, the dragoon took a few breaths and examined her arm. It was seriously injured, bleeding terribly, and most likely (from the looks of the beast), there was a poison running through her system. Freya actually had the nerve to smile as she held her spear in the only hand she had that still operated well.

Heh... I shouldn't have let Eiko leave... This bloody creature will be the end of me if I let this battle continue!

Steeling her resolve once again, Freya put her wounds aside and vaulted high into the air, as high as her legs would allow. The beast could only hop after her; he would never be able to reach her at that altitude. Wanting to finish the battle before her injuries increased, Freya twirled her spear in her hand like the blade of an airship propeller, and with the gathered momentum she was acquiring, she thrust her weapon towards the monster like a lightning bolt.

Of course, the creature's speed helped it avoid the blow, but Freya was already descending by the time it hopped away. Wasting no time, not even a split second to let her feet recover from the impact, Freya yanked her weapon out of the ground and struck at the monster with a final, powerful blow. Not even this scourge could avoid it; the spear sailed straight through its head, splitting it apart and sending a delicious amount of unmentionables spewing out as a result.

"Let the worms feed on thy flesh, demon!" snarled Freya. She let out a weary sigh of victory, then allowed herself to cringe at her unimaginable wounds. When she was not kicking herself for allowing Eiko to scamper off, Freya dedicated her steps to moving towards Conde Petie.

Freya began to experience *déjà vu* as Eiko wrapped what remained of her wounds in a few bandages. She had indeed made it to Conde Petie with just enough spunk to call out for a doctor, and had been rushed inside the nearest inn so that she could be treated. An antivenom was injected into her system just in case, and the scars she had received were healed up by Eiko and the medics there. Freya had been ordered to rest and recover while the business of gaining the dwarves' alliance was handled by Mikoto and the others, and since she was plumb tired anyway, she eagerly agreed.

But like all well-earned rests, this one did not last very long. By the following day, Ghiott and his dwarves were massing together and devoting their services to helping the Alexandrian army seek out and destroy Iudicium's base—or, at the least, get rid of any leftover monsters from the previous invasions. Steiner's Pluto Knights came by the day after, complaining about something as always, with poor Steiner feeling like he was still babysitting an infantry.

"It's a wonder that many of these men classify as knights," he grunted as he rested his bones. "Ah, well. They are noteworthy in tight situations. Anyway, I have been assigned to hold my ground

here and scout around thoroughly. I assume you know everyone else's duties?"

"Yes," said Freya. "Mikoto is going to look around Black Mage Village, and I'm to be stationed at Madain Sari. The continent is large, but if our armies spread themselves out and search prudently, there won't be many places to hide. I only pray we find the enemy's base soon."

"As do I," agreed Steiner.

With Alexandria's business in Conde Petie now concluded, Freya, Eiko, Mikoto, and the remnants of their army could proceed onward, into the nearby Black Mage village. Naturally, Freya hoped that there would be no more enemies like Scourge waiting for her around that area.

There were not.

There were *worse* enemies.

With her battle wounds but a bad memory now, and the attack of Scourge nothing more than a nightmare, Freya was altogether prepared for anything that got in her way. This was not the time to think or brood, nor beat herself up for past mistakes. She was now concentrated, at the front of the line, keeping watch for anything suspicious, so

as not to make those same mistakes she regretted over and over again.

So far, the increased party saw nothing out of the ordinary, which of course was suspicious enough on its own. Anything that “seemed” to be commonplace and quiet was most certainly anything but. It had been silence which ushered in Scourge, and an era of peace that had brought the invading forces of Iudicium and Ignus to Alexandria. Freya had a feeling that this new time of quiet and inactivity would be no different.

Thankfully, Black Mage village was not very far away from Conde Petie, and the whole group got through the forest surrounding it in only a few minutes. The dwarves had never been through the woods themselves, since it was so thick and deep that “even owls did not live there”, so it was new territory for them. Mikoto was the guide through the woods, since she was the only one among them who really knew her way through those woods. Eiko and Freya had been to this forested town before, but not so many times that they knew how to get there.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” said Mikoto as politely as she could. There was even a bit of a smile on her face as she guided the group into the village,

and perhaps even a bit of pride in her eyes. Certainly, she was beginning to adapt to her home. Freya smiled and breathed a little easier as she entered into the simply-constructed village, and dropped her guard as she ventured into a friendly land. Both the Black Mages and the Genomes living there were kind to travelers, but a little confusing to live around.

“Ah, it’s been awhile since I’ve last been here,” commented the dragoon. She wandered away to be by herself for awhile, and everyone else split up to have a talk with the other mages and Genomes. Certainly, now that this new alliance was being made, there was no place Iudicium could hide, and there was no enemy that could oppose them. The skill of the Genomes, the strength of the dwarves, the magic of the mages, and the might of Alexandria were perhaps too much to handle, even for a madman such as Iudicium.

However, Freya was not aware of the pair of eyes stalking her...

Resting herself against a tree, Freya allowed a bit of peace and comfort to slip into her mind as she waited for the alliance to be sealed. Truth be told, her business was not in the diplomacy of the

meeting, but in guarding those who were traveling, and fighting off the monsters that were encountered. Freya Crescent had a bit of a diplomatic side to her, and if she *really* wanted to, she could have been with everyone else—

Where it was safer...

But no, her place was not in a small room, talking to other people and convincing them to go along with something. She was a fighter, a dragoon by profession and by choice, and unless old age claimed her first, she hoped to die in the field of battle one day—not droning on endlessly. Besides, the day was nice and cool, and the breeze was gentle and ticklish, and the shady leaves above were falling gently onto the ground as autumn took full swing. Black Mage Village was especially beautiful during the late harvest season, when the leaves turned golden and fiery red, and the air had a delicious scent in it.

Hearing leaves rustle was a common occurrence in Black Mage Village. One could not take a step without hearing some activity in the trees, since the entire place was surrounded by forests. Freya did not concern herself with this sound as she rested there, despite how unnaturally loud and frequent it was.

She thought nothing of it—perhaps a squirrel or some large bird—and not concerning herself with such a problem was her mistake.

Suddenly, something leaped out of the trees, and ran towards Freya with such an incredible speed that she was almost killed without having moved at all. But at the absolute last second, the dragoon realized her life was in critical danger, and put every last ounce of power into her legs as she leaped into the canopy above. Whatever was about to attack her had left two very deep gashes in the tree she had previously been reclining against. These cuts were almost deep enough to split the tree apart, and had Freya not leaped away at the last possible moment, she would have received that same treatment.

So, of course she was a bit frightened. Whatever had attacked her had done it so suddenly that she barely had time to blink.

The dragoon came out of her perch to see what was trying to kill her, but it was long gone by then. She held her breath in and grabbed her weapon, keeping it at the ready in case the being came back. There were no sounds this time, no birds chirping or brooks babbling or even the muted conversations of black mages. There was complete and utter silence

in the middle of a forest, and this was chilling enough to send a shiver up Freya's spine. Her stomach twisted and turned as she kept her senses at an acme.

Without any warning, the attacker assaulted her again, slashing at her with an insane speed. Freya's spear was out and blocking every blow, but the being moved too fast for her to get a good look at it. Finally, to her surprise, the attacker ceased its rampage, and stood still just long enough for the dragoon to get a really good look at it.

It seemed to be a human male, dressed from toe to neck in black array. His boots, pants, shirt, gloves, everything was black, including the wide-brimmed hat he had over his head. The hat was so large that it covered his hair and eyes, though if Freya looked carefully enough, she could see strands of blonde hair trickling out of the hat. She squinted hard at the man, holding her spear in case of another attack, and waited for the man's next move.

"...An assassin?" she guessed. The man smiled cruelly.

"Yes. I have been in the service of Vikar Iudicium for many years, as you might have already guessed by now."

“Yeah, go figure. Let me guess: you’ve been sent to kill me.”

“Correct.” The man with the hat extended his arms a bit, and in a flash, two medium-range knives came twirling into view. The man stood in an offensive position, aiming one of his knives at Freya and keeping the other as a defense.

“I am the world’s third-best assassin, which is more than enough to kill you and your comrades. I don’t know why Vikar wants you dead so badly, but I’m not paid to ask questions. Tell me, how quickly do you want to die?”

“I don’t think I’m going to be the one who dies,” growled Freya. The assassin smiled thinly and let out a chuckle.

“Sure. There are only two others who are even greater than I am—I believe you know one of them, The Hunter—but being third is no problem. I’m all you’ll need.”

“You have a name?”

“They call me *Bloodbane*,” answered the killer. Freya shivered as she recognized the infamous name, and her silvery fur turned pale a bit as she grasped the full concept of what she was doing, and

who she was facing up against. Truly, if ever there was a man to fear, it was the ruthless and cold-blooded killer, Bloodbane. This man killed dragons for sport, and could probably give Beatrix a hard time. To be honest, Freya didn't know if she could beat him or not.

"I am Freya Crescent," she told him. Bloodbane's smile faded, and the stoic face of the third-deadliest assassin in the known world stared back at her in cold calculation.

"Okay. Now, let us begin our struggle for survival. If you can manage to kill me, which I doubt you will, I will let you live. Is that a deal?"

"Cute," she muttered, and without another word wasted, the two warriors stood off against each other, and for the fourth time that week, Freya was going to be fighting for her very life.

Both Freya and the assassin Bloodbane glared at each other in the deadly silence of the Black Mage village. Both warriors, fully knowledgeable of the other's skills, stared each other down and calculated everything about their opponent: their breath, their body form, their faces, the way they swallowed down their anxiety... The only thing missing was a clock that would indicate when it was High Noon.

Both Freya and Bloodbane exploded after each other in a single sudden moment, their weapons splitting the air apart as they sailed towards each other. The knives and the spear clashed together with a mighty clang, sending a few sparks tumbling down to the ground. Both warriors glared at each other with renewed intensity, pushing and testing the other's strength as their eyes burned into each others'.

Suddenly, Freya broke free of the lock and swung her spear horizontally. Bloodbane strafed away, then leaped back into the attack and performed a fiery dance with his blades—*swish, swish!* Freya twisted her spear to defend against the slices, then blazed forth with her own, the blade crashing down in an angle and a swift upper-thrust of the butt of the spear. Bloodbane's knives moved accordingly, like they were extensions of his hands and not simple weapons.

Bloodbane spun around like a razor-filled tornado, kicking up wind and knives as he struck again and again with each of his weapons—one was bad enough, being short and exceptionally fast and sharp enough to cleave through a tree, but with one knife in each of his hands, he could strike at twice the speed, slice at twice the pain, and the length of

such weapons enabled him to sneak in close, where long-range weapons could have no affect.

But Freya had fought many short-range battles before with her spear; that had been a prerequisite when she trained in the Burmecian military. She knew that while her spear was good as a long-range weapon, it was useless in close battles like this, unless one knew how to wield it properly. Freya was a master of her weapon, perhaps second only to Fratley and a few others scattered around, and she could improvise when her choice of attack proved unsuccessful. A long spear meant more places she could use as a defense.

So, Freya blocked the blows sent her way for the time, playing defense and watching Bloodbane's movements. Of course, after a few seconds of attacking, the assassin figured out Freya's plan. He did not get so high on the murderous ladder for nothing; his skill and experience allowed him to respond and maneuver according to whatever his opponents were planning, in no less the time it took him to swing his deadly knives. Smiling tightly, Bloodbane leaped backwards just far enough so that Freya would think she had the freedom of long range again, and then...

When the black-clad man vaulted backwards, Freya did indeed release her defense and positioned her spear back to an offensive stance. With a significant distance now between them, she had the opportunity to run towards him and attempt an attack at last, so she took it. Bloodbane figured she would do something similar to this (not *exactly*, of course, but he was close), and kept his eyes locked onto Freya's weapon, watching it wobble and weave and split the molecules of oxygen.

She knows she's not going to hit me, so she's going to try for a few weak slashes. I should be able to pull off something decent, but I'm going to have to go a little limber... Gritting his teeth, Bloodbane hastily swerved underneath Freya's spear as it swished at him, and with his body bent so much out of proportion, he really had to concentrate on what he was doing. Quickly, he placed his back on the ground and wrapped his shoes around Freya's waist, and used the momentum she had built up to throw her away, into the distance.

A back-breaking crunch later, Bloodbane was on his feet and Freya had barely missed slamming into a tree. She had used her hands and feet to absorb the blow, so they stung something powerful by the time she came back to the ground. For a brief moment,

she stood there gazing at her opponent, trying to examine such a deadly foe, while at the same time, trying to think up of her own battle strategy. She could do it, though; this was what she truly lived for.

“I am astounded,” she told him. “I didn’t see that one coming. You must’ve torn a few muscles pulling off that one.”

“I’m a very limber man,” explained Bloodbane. “But yes, it wasn’t easy. Don’t think I’ll be trying that for awhile!” He snorted, and exercised his strained back muscles for awhile as Freya studied him. The dragoon hissed to herself, knowing that he was just playing with her, and took her spear into her right hand. Bloodbane didn’t have to know that this wasn’t her dominant hand.

“Ah, so you’ve been using your other hand all this time!” he exclaimed. “What, you think that if you use your right, I’d die too soon? Please. Spare me the melodramatics! I mean, *why else* do you think I go for the ambidextrous attack?” Freya snarled but said nothing, and hoped that her unorthodox and slightly foolish move would work. Only one way to find out...

Once again, the dragoon and the assassin tore after each other, kicking up the wind and leaves as

they crashed together and fought. There was no more silence in the forest—now, it was a master assassin performing his art, and a dragoon defending herself against something that could only be called a Force. This Bloodbane was *good*—no, he was great. Freya honestly couldn't remember the last time any single foe caused her so much trouble.

...Well, there was Beatrix, but...

A sharp crashing sound broke the dragoon's concentration, and sparks spat out at both her and Bloodbane. Their weapons had collided together again, and were locked in a vicious stalemate. Freya knew that if this fight was prolonged, then the Black Mages, the Genomes, and the others would probably rush over to her and "see what all the noise was about", and their presence would only prove a distraction for her. This fight needed to end *fast*.

Snarling, Freya went for broke and gave a sudden kick to Bloodbane's midsection. He grimaced terribly, and in an instant, his guard was lowered. Freya saw her chance and dove forward to finish him off, but before she could swing her spear, Bloodbane quickly leaped forward and attacked with his knives. Freya had to raise her spear up quickly to

shield herself from the blow, but from the way Bloodbane attacked, he had not intended to kill.

Yet.

As his blades nicked up against the Dragon's Whisker, Bloodbane quickly twirled his weapons in his hands, and rammed the butt end of both knives right into Freya's body. The two powerful blows dug in deep, sending a powerful wave of pain smashing into her gut. Freya growled in agony and let a tear fall out of her eye before bowling over slightly. That cheap shot had hurt like crazy, but Freya was ridiculously lucky that her opponent had not chosen to stab her.

"Well, looks like we're even again," he grunted. Freya, squinting her eyes from the blow she had received, bared her teeth and countered with her own thought.

"Yes... but not for long!" Instantly, she slashed at him, but Bloodbane's recovery was just as fast, and both his knives cleaved at Freya. Both attacks connected, and a brief shower of blood fell onto the ground as a man's chest and a woman's arm were slit open.

They both let out an exclamation of pain, but like masochistic warriors, they dove right back into the battle for even more. It then turned into a lawless free-for-all, with attacks going here and there, bodies ducking and weaving out of the way, weapons raising and swinging and blocking and slashing like the baton of a conductor, and more slashes, scars, and raining droplets of blood than one would think for a single one-on-one match.

Twenty minutes after their fight began, both Freya and Bloodbane were on their knees, panting and wheezing and bleeding terribly. The only thing that covered them more than sticky red goo was their own perspiration, and more than that, battle fatigue. They both looked like they needed a rest, since during the whole fight they had been evenly matched. Freya wanted to finish the job now, while Bloodbane was on his knees, but she was barely in a condition to move; the situation was identical for the man in black.

Two more minutes passed before they both stood up for another charge. Their mouths silent, the only thing that interested these two warriors was a quick kill, and a chance to end the fight. They both tore after each other, each one preparing for a death blow, but who would survive and who would end up

dead was completely indeterminate. Freya had the range and the power, but Bloodbane had that sickening speed of his, and the fact that there were two completely independent weapons and not just a single one put the odds of survival in his favor.

The two collided, Freya ramming her spear forward and Bloodbane plunging his knives in, and the both froze as they felt cold steel being planted in their bodies. Freya let out a groan, as both knives cut into her flesh, and Bloodbane..... Well, Bloodbane merely smiled. His injury was not as great as his opponent's.

“Well... I must admit... you did give me a challenge... but now... I believe... this hunt is over. Fare well, dragoon!” Bloodbane grinned mercilessly at Freya, and pulled his weapons out of her body. But instead of submitting to the man in black and fainting away into Death, Freya gritted her teeth and plunged her weapon even further, literally impaling her enemy all the way through. The spear had been thrust in so deep that even the wooden shaft was protruding slightly; the whole blade had gone through, all the way through, leaving the victory to Freya.

“Yes... fare well indeed!” she whispered. The woman shouted out to her defeated foe with a voice of victory, and appeared to be completely unscathed as she gloated over the battle. “...I am Freya! Recall the name on your journey to Hell!” And with that, she yanked her weapon out of Bloodbane—not too quickly, so as to rip up a bit of his inside—and pushed the dead man out of her sight, and into a river, where he was washed away into the distance. Calmly, though she was bleeding severely, Freya held her spear proudly in front of her, and quietly gazed into the sun as the wind tickled her hair.

But even her pride and will could falter, and in a few moments, Freya was wearily crumbling to the floor, muttering as loud as she could for a medic.

Eiko just had to remark how odd it was that such a powerful dragoon like Freya could suffer so many injuries in the span of such a short period of time. Freya curtly told the little girl to “kindly shut up and pay attention to what you’re doing”, and for that snide comment, Eiko gave her patient a little pinch.

“Meanie,” she pouted. “Here I am healing you up, from a wound that obviously had the potential to kill you, and all you can do is be ungrateful!”

“I’m not ungrateful,” muttered Freya proudly. “I just don’t like the way you made fun of me. That assassin was extremely skilled and powerful, and it took everything I had to beat him. I don’t see *you* stepping in to handle a few fights!”

“Well, you think that’s because I wasn’t trained like you?” Eiko squeezed a few bandages too tightly on purpose, causing Freya to severely wince and hiss in pain.

“OUCH! That hurts!”

“That’s what you get for insulting me!” snapped Eiko. Freya glared at the summoner with eyes burning bright, and instantly poor Eiko shirked back.

“Stop being so immature,” she growled. “I swear, with you and Zidane, it feels like I’m babysitting or something.” Eiko gave Freya a sad pout, and carefully walked over to the dragoon with a sad expression on her face.

“Are you in a bad mood?”

“Yes, I’m in a bad mood!” hissed Freya. “I nearly got killed by that assassin, I lost quite a bit of blood, and the only thing you can give me is your immaturity! Yes, I’m grateful for your help, but I really wish you could show me more support. I

practically saved a few lives today by eliminating that killer before he could attack anyone else! So just... be a little more grateful!”

“...I’m sorry,” sighed Eiko sadly. Freya rolled her eyes, knowing full well that the kid was just trying to manipulate her into feeling sorry. It was a trick Freya knew well, and it would not work on the dragoon.

“Apology accepted,” she sniffed. “Now hurry up. I’m starting to feel better, but we need to move out as quickly as possible.”

“Don’t be in such a rush!” insisted Eiko as she administered more cure spells on Freya. “I still have a long way to go, and everyone else is resting up from their travels! So, give us more time, all right?” Freya sighed, and apologized for her haste. If anything, the dragoon severely needed to work on her patience and her temper.

Once Freya was healed up and everybody was finally ready to go, the increased group packed up their things and set out for the final destination, Madain Sari. So far, there really had not been that many worries on the trip. With the exception of the big battles that had been fought on the beach and the plains, and the vicious attack of Scourge and

Bloodbane, the trip had been peaceful for the most part. Freya kept on anticipating some great big malevolent change to occur, something like the discovery of Iudicium's fortress, or at least an overwhelming foe—not that the previous ones hadn't been difficult.

Still, she felt like there was something amiss that day, as she and Eiko and everyone else took the long walk from Black Mage forest into the Conde Petie canyons. Naturally, the place was pretty quiet, but the journey had been one of silence and not of extreme noise and confusion—which made it all the worse. Freya had expected half the continent to be deluged in a massive confusion and more enemies than she could possibly count, and that every step would lead into another vicious battle... But the silence, the unknown anticipation... this was by far worse than anything that the original scenarios could present.

Freya's feeling was that there was some sort of hidden dread lurking around somewhere in the canyon, just aching to pounce on them at any given moment. This premonition of hers increased every time the group advanced a little more, every time her furry feet touched the rocky ground, every time her

lungs were granted breath, every time her heart pulsated blood through her body...

And then, everything was thrown violently into disorder and anarchy as her feelings proved correct. A creature emerged out of nowhere, screaming and shouting and scaring everybody half to death. Without a wasted second, whatever had jumped them went into a maniacal attack, thrusting its body everywhere in an uncontrolled frenzy. Everybody, Freya included, had been caught completely off guard by the creature, and were now being flattened by its unfocused and unpredictable assault.

Finally, the dragoon found her senses and her spear, and whacked the creature with the butt end of her weapon. It was sent sailing backwards, and rolled on the ground in an unconscious heap. Freya took notice that the attacker was human, just barely. Its hair was completely frizzled and messed up, like it had been severely electrocuted in the near past. The human had a wild face, full of an insane and demented expression, and its only piece of clothing, other than the blue leggings it wore, was a ripped-up straitjacket it had obviously torn out of.

The investigation of the man was cut off quickly, as it leaped to its feet and began snarling at its

opponents. Like a vicious dog, mad on rabies, it drooled and cackled and lunged at them with its short, sharp teeth, and scratched with his crooked claws. The creature was maniacal and uncontrollable, exploding into a frenzy that had never been seen on the field of battle nor even in the nightmares of most other people. Its screams were loud and rough, more like barking, and the flames in his eyes burned powerfully as he assaulted the group.

Suddenly, two Genomes piled up on him, pinning down each of his arms with their own body weight. The demented man snarled and snapped at them, but he was unable to move from the lock they had on. Freya, keeping her spear aimed straight at the maniac, slowly stepped towards him to get a better look.

“...Who are you?” she asked. The man choked out one word before bursting into a fit of vicious laughter.

“Insanity!!!” Suddenly, the man’s powerful legs sprang forth into action, vaulting him up off the ground, where he sent the Genomes flying with his incredible strength. The madman then turned his

attention to Freya, and dribbled so violently that he would have put a whole nursery to shame.

“Pretty-pretty rat-rat,” he cackled, and before Freya could show her disgust, the man leaped right on top of her and sent her tumbling to the floor. He clamped his hands over her wrists, pinning her down easily, and began to attack her face. He bit, he snarled, he barked, he lashed at her perversely with his tongue... The man was uncontrollable, truly a work of Insanity, and the only thing Freya could do as a defense was scream and wiggle.

Thankfully, the man had attacked while she was in the company of others. All the while Insanity was snapping at her, the company tried yanking him off, or else poked him with their weapons in hopes of removing him. The man screamed out as a sword punctured his thigh, and with a face burning with mad fires, he turned and roared at whoever had attacked him—and everybody else.

This one-man monster lunged towards the group and began tossing everybody into the air, like they were made out of paper. He was hopelessly outnumbered, but with his mind lost and his violent urges on a rampage, the concept of winning and losing was nonexistent. He simply attacked, and

attacked, and attacked, not knowing anything else except for the delicious sight of blood and the screams of other people.

Freya groaned, and tried to get up off the floor. She had been taken completely off guard, and was attacked in the most unreal way. Insanity was feral, unstoppable, completely maniacal and extremely dangerous. He had spit all over Freya, and a few bite marks showed where his teeth had dug in. With more disgust and pain on her face than she knew what to do with, Freya wiped off whatever she could with her sleeve, and readied her spear to put the man out of his misery.

Insanity leaped away from attacking the others, and let out a howling cackle as he prepared to strike his next opponent. Freya was ready this time, and had her spear pointed squarely at the madman. Insanity would not stop for anything, least of all a spear; he would continue to charge and rip apart the opposition until the day he died. He would not reason, would not exhaust, would not tire or surrender. This madman only knew how to rip things apart, and to act according to whatever his dead mind wished, so Freya had to deliver him into death or else suffer from his attack forever.

Insanity let out a scream as he rushed towards Freya, but at the last second, she flipped right over his body. Landing on the other side of him, Freya quickly slashed at his unprotected backside, creating a massive gash on his clothes and his body. Insanity howled out in pain, and turned around to turn his attacker into shreds. Freya immediately jammed her spear right into his chest once he turned around, and from the shocked look on the man's face, the deed was done.

And then... something happened to him.

"My mind..." he whispered, 'it's... clearing up. I'm... being freed from that sickening madness... "The man looked at Freya and smiled, perhaps more aware of what was going on than even she was."... Thank you,' he whispered, "for releasing me..." And with that, he fell down to the ground with a smile, and was able to sleep at long last.

After defeating both Insanity and Bloodbane, Freya and her company finally made it to Madain Sari. It certainly took them awhile, what with the distractions and the countless villains they had fought, but the effort had been worth it to visit the last inhabited place on the Outer Continent. Now there were very few places left to look for

Iudicium's hideout, and fewer still enemies to fight. But all that could wait awhile; it was time the gang had a little rest. They had certainly earned it.

Eiko and Mikoto wandered away from the main group to hang out with the local moogles, while Freya took the more scenic route and headed for the Eidolon Wall. This landmark was particularly peaceful and quiet, with a warm incense burner filling the air with its aroma. Freya carefully walked around the wall full circle, examining the Eidolons painted on it. To be frank, she had never actually been in the wall before, or even in Madain Sari, so of course she took a bit of time to examine it.

When she had had her fill, she found a good place to sit, and reclined close to the incense burner that had been placed in the center of the wall. The glowing embers directly behind her were soothing, and the smell masked away the stench that Insanity had left behind. Freya let out a brief smile as she considered what had happened to her thus far—the trials she had gone through in getting to that point in time were copious enough on their own.

She recalled, with mixed emotions, the personal pilgrimage she had made, and wondered when her road had begun. Certainly, she had been set on that

path when her parents were killed and when her uncle Ficher took her in. There was also that day she met Fratley, and their brief but happy years spent together—and of course, what would a trip down memory lane be without the presence of that rascal Zidane?

“I must be getting old,” chuckled Freya to herself, “if that stupid little monkey has grown up into a King. By God, what is constant in this world?!”

The companionship of reliable friends, she reasoned, and of course, her thoughts went to Beatrix first. Her memories faintly recalled a dark era in the past, when Beatrix had suffered under the thumb of the power-hungry Brahne, and assisted in destroying Burmecia and Cleyra, and those awkward days following the old Queen’s death, when Freya didn’t know what to think of the one-eyed woman.

But oh, how the light did shine soon afterwards! It had been a strange fate that caused Freya and Beatrix to mold together a long-buried friendship: an enemy force invaded Burmecia and destroyed it beyond redemption, Freya crawled to Alexandria to beg for help, Beatrix ran off by herself...

Freya had never told anybody, but she had worried every hour of the day for Beatrix's safety when the knight had stormed off to liberate Burmecia. The two were on the borderline between friends and enemies then, but even so, even though she never revealed it to anybody, Freya had concerned herself over Beatrix's safety. She had let out a very genuine smile when the slightly-older warrior returned victoriously, but was still in too deep of a depression to show anything except a smile.

And then there was that beautiful afternoon on the Alexandrian balcony, where Freya stared Death in the face, and lost her mind and the will to live, and where Beatrix rescued the woman who had been both friend and enemy to her at one point. After that moment, and many more moments afterwards, the two warriors bonded together dramatically, like they had been the missing puzzles to each others' lives, and only then were they coming together.

I'll be a bloody mess if I end up loving that one-eyed freak, muttered Freya mentally. Then suddenly, a realization struck her, and Freya sat up as she came to a surprising conclusion.

“...Oh, my Lord!” she hissed. “I love her! My God, I love that one-eyed freak! Dear me, it’s true! By God...” Chuckling softly, though humor was not a part of it, Freya removed her hat and rested again on the pedestal that held the incense burner. Her smile reached into the sky, but her disbelief reached higher still. Slowly, clumsily, she raised her hand to the sky, and began tracing the clouds with her finger.

“Please don’t die on me, Beatrix,” she muttered softly. “I have one unbelievable story to tell you when I get back. But by God, you’re annoying. Hmph, I wish Fratley *had* fought you and won. At least you wouldn’t be influencing me so much.”

But you do love her, sighed her conscience. Admit it. You don’t know what you’d do with yourself if you lost her.

“Shut up,” she sighed. “So what?...Ahh, must be this crazy smoke I’m inhaling, or blood loss.” Freya chuckled and began cursing everything she could think of, just for the sake of letting a few curse words vent out of her system. She was also starting to become very hungry.

“Haven’t eaten in hours,” she remarked as she touched her stomach. A sudden eclipse of the sun broke all her previous thoughts, and the woman

looked up to see what the matter was. The day was not going to turn stormy, and a total eclipse over Madain Sari wouldn't happen for a few years, and Erin wasn't so crazy that she would fly a few airships overhead—so what was it? The glinting rays of the sun overhead blocked the obstruction, but what Freya could make out didn't seem all that friendly.

Freya was still shielding her vision when the obstruction landed on the ground, even though there was now nothing covering up the sun. Her eyes could barely gaze at whatever was before her, so bright were the rays emanating from it. She could barely see that the creature had a bipedal build, probably humanoid, but that was it. It glowed brighter than the hottest flames—if Freya didn't know any better, she would have sworn that this was what the being was *made* out of.

“What are you?” she asked. The creature's voice was as powerful as its owner was bright.

“Fear not, Burmecian! I have come to you as a beacon of warning, to steer you away from these dangers you face now!”

“That doesn't exactly answer my question,” she muttered. The creature issued out a soft humming

sound, and the radiation of light surrounding it dimmed considerably. When Freya could get a good look at it, she was astonished to find that the being defied anything that she could really describe. Its body was made out of something similar to fire, hence the glowing, and its head seemed to radiate something like a rainbow. The creature was covered in white, and wielded a flaming sword in one of its “arms”.

“I am the Metatron,” said the creature, *“the earpiece of my masters. I listen and obey, and in turn, I am sent out as a herald to relay my masters’ wishes to others. It is unfortunate that my master is not in this area himself; otherwise, he would attend to you personally.”*

“Metatron...?” whispered Freya. “...You mean... you’re an angel?”

“Of a kind,” answered the creature. Freya stared at the brilliant creature in awe, and though it gave her word to not fear, she couldn’t help but quiver before its presence.

“Then, you have been sent from the Heavens to warn my group? Have you been sent to warn us of the dangers of Iudicium’s hideout?”

“No, Burmecian. It is by Iudicium’s word that I come here, to steer you away from this pursuit. Turn back now, while you still can, and you may be spared his judgment.”

“Ah, I understand it now!” growled Freya as she whipped her spear out. “You are not an angel of Heaven, but a demon! Yes, I remember now! The Metatron was a *fallen* angel, was it not?” A pause. The flaming creature before her said nothing for a very long time.

“That is correct,” it replied. “But nevertheless, I will aid you if you agree to leave. I will destroy you, however, if you remain behind. I don’t think I need to remind you that to do battle with an angel, especially the Metatron, is a gruesome mistake. Even the man I call master does not have the capabilities to destroy me.”

“So then why—”

“It serves Our purpose,” answered Metatron quickly. Freya scowled grimly at the “heavenly” being and bared her teeth at it. She knew what the creature meant when it said *those* words.

“I see,” she growled. “I suppose this ‘purpose’ of yours is very similar to what Necron wanted to

achieve a few years back.”

“Necron was a weak, frightened, sick little child,” replied Metatron coolly. *“He was but a servant of Death, not even skilled enough to mimic his own master. I, on the other hand, was given the privilege of commanding Death—the angel, I mean. Compare, then, what I say, and what you know of this Necron, and you will reason that escape is the best solution.”*

“I cannot do that,” said Freya emptily as she held her spear in a defensive position. Metatron silently gazed at her, or so it seemed, and advanced slightly as it gave her one last chance.

“Why?”

“Because I’m bloody stubborn, all right?! Jeez, do I need to answer for everything I do?!?!”

“You might.”

“And do shut up,” groaned Freya. “Of course I don’t stand a bloody chance against you! You think I don’t know that? If I had any other choice, any choice at all, I would take it. But if it’s between running away and being destroyed by you, well then... my soul is prepared.”

“You had your chance,” replied the creature in what might have been a sigh. *“One way or another, I will get you to leave this continent and abandon your search. And as the Father Below has said, ‘If reason fails, then force prevails’. En garde!”* Freya braced herself for the collision with Metatron, and although she really did know that she could not win, she still held her ground, with the same stubbornness and pride that had defined her all of her life.

Well, time to bow out of this little play, she muttered to herself. It’s been fun, but it looks like this is my last call. Ah, well. I’ll be dying in combat, and soon, I’ll be with all the people that I love. Yes, I may leave Beatrix behind—or, I may not. She may very well join me in death. If that’s the case, then I have no regrets. Dying will be but a privilege—that is, if I’m allowed it. I’m not going down without a fight, no matter who this is!

Famous last words...

Metatron suddenly struck first, slamming into Freya with its fiery fist. The dragoon bowled over from such an overwhelming attack, barely able to breathe or even think straight. That one single blow had felt like a wrecking ball slamming into her! But the pain did not stop there: Metatron slammed its

elbow against Freya's back as she crumbled to the floor, sending her crashing to the ground and digging up a massive hole in the process. But even then, the fallen angel had not finished with her, and with its flaming body rising high up into the air, it stretched its arms out and spewed forth a purifying fire to scorch the land into oblivion.

Freya's body had been beaten to the point of madness already, yet these were only two blows she suffered. Still, she was completely unable to move, not even to wiggle. Yet the flames were mercilessly falling towards her, and unless she wanted her bones to be melted into powder, she would have to summon strength she didn't know she had, and leap out of the small crater. With her entire body in pain, from both the powerful attack and the impact on the ground, Freya somehow managed to put all her might into a single bound, and leaped just whiskers away from the column of flame as it crashed down on the ground.

Ignoring the stabbing agony in her gut and backside, she scurried along as far away from the fire as her feet could carry her. Metatron grudgingly noticed that the woman had escaped death through some extreme miracle, and ceased his inferno to give her chase. Infinitely faster, the blazing creature

of dark light shot down to the ground and landed directly in front of Freya, the blazing sword in its hand begging for a battle.

“We meet again,” it spoke. Freya snarled at the creature, and with most of her muscles singing out in pain, she managed to produce her Dragon’s Whisker spear. The legendary weapon was coated with an ether that rendered it indestructible, even to the attack of an angel, but it was no guarantee that the holder would be so strong.

She held her spear up in defense as Metatron’s blazing-hot sword crashed down upon her. It took every last fiber of Freya’s strength, and some new sources she never thought she had, just to keep the blazing blade from splitting her face apart. Metatron looked somewhat bored, though since the creature had no face, it was hard to pick out an emotion. Their lock lasted for a few seconds more before Freya took a step forward and performed a backflip-kick aimed straight at Metatron’s “head”.

She twirled in the air and struck what seemed to be the creature’s face, sending it tumbling backwards a few steps. Even if she did nothing but stun the creature, it bought her precious seconds to recover and form her own attack. Without any mercy

at all, Freya bounded forward and swung her spear in a downward angle, attempting to cleave the monster apart at the shoulder. Metatron's recovery was quick, and his weapon met hers in an effortless defense.

The two flew into a fanatical frenzy of attacks, lunging and storming at each other without any care for their own safety. The Heavens trembled as one of its fallen stars assaulted a mere Burmecian, pounding away at everything she had to offer with its mighty sword of fire. Metatron's power was immense, like having a large building smash up against Freya's defenses over and over again, yet its speed was equally lethal, as fast as the speed villainy took when it conquered the mind of an intelligent creature.

Metatron lit the sky up with fire as he continued to attack Freya over and over, again and again, with every strike and slash and cleave and swipe. The monster was out of control yet very much *in* control; it danced and weaved and twirled the sword in the air like an artist would twirl a paintbrush before their masterpiece. The ground did indeed become colored in Freya's blood from time to time, as a few stray embers from Metatron's sword popped and sizzled and scorched Freya's fur.

The dragoon, on the other hand, was fighting more ferociously than she had ever thought possible. Not even during her last days in Burmecia had she battled with so much animalism and determination, and in that fight, she had given her very soul just to survive. Not even her battle with Vikar Iudicium had been so intense, and she had given everything she had and more in that fight. But this was different.

Somehow, Freya's skills could increase after every desperate battle. Her speed, strength, stamina, even her strategy would grow by leaps and bounds after such mindless, ferocious battles. She had fought brave and true in her fights with Beatrix, and in the endless war against Kuja and Garland; there was the Burmecian battle, and those two times where she struck at Beatrix with mindlessness and desperation, and the battle with Iudicium, and all the most recent fights where she had faced dreadful opponents.

Freya was literally at the very top of her game in this fight, thrusting her spear in so many ways to protect her life and to make an attempt to end that of her opponent. She made good use of the powerful muscles in her legs, and twirled her arms around to synchronize perfectly with the weapon that she had mastered. Her body moved like water, graceful and

smooth, probably the after-effect of the years training as a Cleyran dancer. Every last skill that she had ever learned, plus a few new ones she was making up right then, were being employed just to keep her pulse going for a few seconds more.

But even when she was performing at her full capacity, Freya Crescent could barely match skills with this dreaded new foe. She anticipated Metatron to be just as powerful as Iudicium—no, more so, perhaps—and though she fought ten times harder then than she ever had, she was still being defeated no matter what.

Metatron was too much for her. The angel swung, cleaved, sliced, and smashed its sword against the spear of Freya numerous times, relentlessly letting his weapon crash against the legendary tool like a statue would crash up against a blade of grass. Had it not been for the ether coating protecting her tool, Freya would have died long ago, for such power as Metatron's was beyond overwhelming.

Slowly, she was being pushed back as Metatron continued to hack away at her with his sword. The monster was unforgiving in its attack, not even allowing Freya a few measly seconds to pause and breathe, let alone think of a strategy. The Burmecian

could only respond to its attack and nothing more: respond, the sword's crashing down, block, try to swing, here it comes again, crash, block, it was closer that time.

Straddling the path with its mighty legs of fiery pillars, Metatron threw its mighty sword at Freya again and again, coming so fast that she could barely get close to it anymore, and soon she was injured across her forehead and on her hand and feet. The wounds were enflamed and burned, and Freya found herself growing weaker and weaker as the attacks progressed. Metatron, sensing victory, moved closer to hack its sword at Freya again and again, over and over, mindlessly onward, so that Freya could barely even hold her spear up after a few minutes.

The endless seconds turned into minutes, the minutes became grueling hours, until half the day passed them by. Little by little, Freya was giving ground, the demon coming closer and closer, the sword crashing upon her faster and faster, harder and harder. She was almost overcome by the smoky stench coming from Metatron's fire, and as the blood dripped down her forehead, she could barely see well enough to parry the attacks. Even after all that time, Freya had not even come close to wounding her seemingly-unstoppable enemy.

As she took yet another step backwards, Metatron flew into the air and slammed hard on the ground, causing such a rumble that the ground quaked open, even producing an endless void of a crater in the ground. The vibrations threw Freya off balance, sending her to the ground and dangerously close to the yawning chasm. Metatron gleefully moved even closer, and with a great sweep of its flaming wings, buffeted Freya and sent her spear flying. The gust sent the dragoon skidding towards the dark crevice that had opened up, and a final blast nearly sent her plummeting into the depths.

Freya's claws were what saved her. Using her Burmecian genetics to her advantage, she grasped the edge of the pit with all her might, creating a few scars in the earth as she struggled to keep herself alive. Metatron slowly walked over to where she was hanging, carefully observing the precarious position she was in. With what appeared to be a sigh, it regarded its unworthy opponent with sad disdain, and made a clicking sound.

"Tsk... you could have avoided this humiliation, Burmecian. If only you had left when you still had the chance..." Freya was too weak to say anything; she had put all of her concentration into hanging onto the crevice. The angel slowly walked right over

to the crevice, and with its feet covered with heavy bronze and fire, it slowly began to crush and burn Freya's fingers.

The dragoon howled out in pain as her poor digits became smashed under the immense weight of the angel's bronze feet, and what was not crushed was burned from the powerful radiating flames. Metatron's cruelty seemed to last for hours on end, and when the demon finally stepped away, Freya's fingers were so weak that she was barely strong enough to hold paper in them, let alone her own body weight. Tears flowed out of her eyes as she forced herself to cling onto the earth.

"And now," hissed Metatron as it raised its flaming saber, *"you will die. There will be some momentary discomfort, and then you will experience a falling sensation. That should be all."* The angel seemed to grin, and raised its sword high into the air, aiming its blazing blade at Freya's exposed fingers.

The tears that were coming out of her eyes increased as she realized that this time, there would be no escaping the hug of Death.

But as Freya wept, she noticed that her spear had been blown miraculously close to the edge of the

crevice. If she could just escape and grab it, perhaps...

Putting pain on the side, for her crushed fingers sang out terribly and her whole body was wracked with agony, Freya put every last bit of strength left in her soul into her hands, and with a push that would shock the thunderous clouds above, she leaped out of the chasm and once again found safe ground. Without wasting a breath, Freya did a cartwheel, grabbed her spear, span around fiercely, and used her gathered strength and momentum to inflict a single, powerful strike upon her foe.

With an explosion more powerful than a volcano, the Dragon's Whisker sliced through Metatron, from the middle of his left arm to its right hip. Metatron appeared to stare at Freya in horror as its body was sliced apart, and without a single sound uttered, the three pieces of the fallen angel slowly tumbled into the gaping canyon that had almost swallowed Freya.

And then, Metatron began to scream.

Freya was able to stand up just long enough to watch Metatron's destroyed body plummet deep into the chasm, where even its flames were doused out by the unfathomable darkness below. Her emerald eyes made sure that the light was gone, and her

pointed ears made sure that no more screams would come from the throat of the fallen angel. Metatron truly had been an unstoppable force; it literally took more than Freya had to offer to destroy it, and in the process, the dragoon had come closer to death than during any other stage in her life, even during that dark hour where she contemplated suicide.

Back then, Death merely brushed up against her; here, it was directly in front of her face.

But with the indomitable threat now extinguished forever, Freya could rest at long last. Too weak to do anything else, she crumbled to the grassy ground and managed to smile as thoughts of her loved ones passed through her mind. She wondered how dear Zidane and dear Garnet were, and what became of Steiner and the crew of the *Hilda Guard*. She even thought about Amarant, perhaps in passing fancy only, and of Cid and Quina and everybody else.

She thought of her mother and father, gathering up only her own personal images of them, since she had been too young to remember their faces. She thought of her dear uncle Ficher, and how he took her in when she had nobody. And of course, she thought of those closest to her heart, Fratley and Beatrix. Freya let out a sigh: to die would reunite her

with her beloved, but to live would ensure her companionship with Beatrix. She certainly had a lot going for her, this dragoon who had finally fought her soul out and more. Freya knew just how many people cared for her and loved her; she would *not* be forgotten at all.

However, she would faint, and with thoughts of Fratley and Beatrix on her mind, this is what she did. The very last thing Freya saw before her eyes closed was a cloud, resembling a daisy a little bit.

———*Intermission*———

General Beatrix Francine de Alexandria had a lot on her mind as the *Red Rose* flew towards Esto Gaza. The main thing was, of course, the battles before her, and perhaps even further still, her last images of Freya and Steiner tickled her psyche. As a warrior who was used to being in the thick of battle, or trying to avert some crisis or another, she rarely had time to truly think things over like that. Perhaps this was just one reason why she bonded so easily with Freya: the other woman was almost always in thought.

Beatrix likened the mousy woman to a sister of hers; their bond ran deeper the oceans, and went back so far that even their combined memories had

failed to dig it out. It truly was a strange predicament that had caused them to separate, and then to meet again, and then to discover each other after so long. This overwhelming feeling never was lost on Beatrix; even after all this time, she found it hard to believe that at one point, she and Freya were strangers at best, and at worst, enemies.

She can take care of herself, reasoned the lady. I don't need her to hold my hand all the time. She has Eiko and Mikoto with her, and then there's Steiner, who'll be in Conde Petie before long, so I have no reason to worry, except over my own condition. Darn... I hate it when I have nothing to do. I wasn't genetically made to be a thinker.

To try and pass the time a little easier, Beatrix paced around the *Red Rose*, taking in the scenery like she never had before. During her many years as a knight in service to the Alexandrian throne, she had rarely gotten the opportunity to really stop and smell the flowers. Being the kingdom's champion enabled her rights and privileges that nobody else could ever hope for, but all in all, it was just a smaller cage for her to fit into. She envied Steiner slightly, for the freedom that had been available to him from time to time, especially during the periods

where he assisted Zidane and Garnet while they were on the road.

Thinking too much again, sighed Beatrix to herself. But what's the use? I have a lot on my mind; typical of me, right before a battle. Usually I'd think nothing of it, but this one is different. Here... I might actually stand a chance of dying. This is just like my rebellion against the former Queen, and my subsequent role in the war against Kuja. I looked Death in the face during those days, yet I always managed to escape its clutches. Could I defy such odds again, and emerge victorious?

Strong I am... but I know when I can't do anything.

I have doubts. Yes, I have doubts. After all, even the champion of the world must be human.

(Sigh) Might as well sleep. Maybe I'll be able to quiet this mind of mine in slumber. I really have nothing better to do, and I need to refresh myself anyway for the upcoming battle. Of course, I also don't like the fact that I'll be in Esto Gaza, the coldest place on Gaia. Hmph... that darned Freya... she got to spend her time in the temperate zone of the Outer Continent, and Amarant and the others in

Daguerro and Oeilvert. But send the champ to the coldest frickin' place in the world...

Beatrix almost chuckled in spite of herself. She never thought herself to be a complainer before. She had never thought twice about where Brahne had sent her, but maybe because that former Queen was just a little bit more strict with her than this one was. Garnet was a *friend*, a dear companion in times darkest, somebody who Beatrix could go to when she was distressing. Garnet was a good Queen, despite the impossible trials that had been thrust at her during her first few months as a monarch. She was fair and just, and kind and considerate, and very loving.

Guess I shouldn't complain after all, sighed Beatrix to herself. Anyway, Steiner "made sure" I packed plenty of warm clothes, and that blasted Freya helped him out. I really am not worth their troubles... but I'm grateful anyway. I'll never admit it out loud, but I love them both dearly. Ha... it was that goof Steiner who convinced me to stay in Alexandria, after all, and it was Freya who changed my life and put joy back into my heart once again. I think..... yes... I think it's high time that I admitted my feelings towards those two.

After I slaughter that wicked butcher Iudicium, of course. Business before pleasure.

...Who am I kidding?! They're both a pleasure! Hahahahahahaha!

Beatrix smiled all the way to her bedroom on the *Rose*, and she was smiling when she woke to face the chilly landscape of the Lost Continent. Below her, spread out like a beautiful blanket, was the environment of frozen ice and low temperatures. The Lost Continent was a freezing land far to the north, even further than the Outer Continent, and since it was so bracingly cold up there, the population was considerably small. There was only one city in the whole place, Esto Gaza, home to a small but influential holy sect.

Beatrix would investigate the town for an hour or two, but her main concern was the continent itself. She had been given a small search party to scour the chilly land, so she hoped that her stay there was brief. Putting a heavy winter coat over her body, some wool leggings over her thighs, mittens and earmuffs over their respective body parts, a hood over her head and a scarf around her neck, Beatrix prepared herself for the chilling wastes of the aptly-named continent.

To her faint surprise, the temperature was not as cold as she thought it would be, so she removed a few excess clothes so she would not overheat quickly. The land was not numbingly cold; it was just more chilly than the weather Beatrix was used to. The land was quite empty, with almost no vegetation except for a distant group of pine trees, and a few crops of dead forests spotted here and there. Stubborn blades of grass poked out of the snow and the frozen dirt, and what animals the land could boast were few in number.

An owl flew overhead and a deer walked in front of the path, but other than that and her search party, Beatrix was all alone in the frozen world. This wasn't so bad; the cold felt good in a way, and the silence was more comforting than it was disturbing. Beatrix was at ease in such a place, and actually let out a smile as she led her troops onward.

"C'mon," she said, beckoning them towards the town, "let's get this over with. Esto Gaza is a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there."

The city of Esto Gaza was void of activity, but not a whole lot of people milled around the place, considering the weather. This far up north, a blistering summer heat wave was about as cool as a

late spring afternoon in the Mist Continent, and much of what was sold in the markets had to be imported from other nearby countries, like Daguerro and Conde Petie. The place was an epicenter for religious and astrological studies, however, and many people made pilgrimages to the city for research or pleasure.

Beatrix and her company spread themselves thin and asked everybody in the city about Iudicium, or if anything else that seemed suspicious was around. Few people could give them any clues, and whatever was learned was usually loose and unconnected. Beatrix learned that the Iudicium family had lived somewhere on the Outer Continent, and that Ipsen's Castle might have in fact been theirs. If that were the case, then either Freya or Steiner, or both, would stumble onto it and hopefully perform their duties to the best of their skills. But that castle had been abandoned long before Brahne decided to conquer the world, and Iudicium claimed that his land had been wiped out by the former Queen. Something didn't add up.

"Ipsen's Castle might have been just one of their estates," theorized Beatrix. "Or else, Iudicium might have moved back into there once he felt safe—or else, he moved in there after the invasion. No, wait

—he had all those golems with him. He had to make those creatures *somewhere*, so he definitely had a base of operations before he invaded Alexandria.”

“You think so?” said one of her commanders. “Yeah, I guess that makes sense. But would Ipsen’s Castle have the facilities to make golems?”

“No, he would need a very experienced mage to do that,” replied the General. “Those weren’t soldiers, those were creatures made by magic. Creating golems is a very difficult process, and therefore it’s become a lost art of kinds. We can therefore eliminate Oeilvert from the list, since his highness stated that there is a magic barrier around that place.”

“Excuse me,” said a voice, and Beatrix turned to see who it was. It was Bishop Benedic, the theoretical ruler of Esto Gaza and an expert on spiritual and astrological matters. “I apologize, but I could not help but overhear your conversation. It seems you are looking for a place abundant in magical energy, correct?”

“Yes, that’s right. Why, would you know of a place?”

“Yes, the Shimmering Islands,” pointed the Bishop. “Now I know their power might have been nullified after the destruction of Terra, but I think there might have been enough power left behind to create an army of golems. If Iudicium wanted to, he could hire a mage wise in the lore of golem-making, and let them use the energy left over from the Isles to make his army.”

“So what you’re saying is that his base could be somewhere around *here*?”

“It’s just a theory,” shrugged the Bishop. “But if I wanted to make those creatures, I would head to the Shimmering Islands. It’s one of the five points of pure magic left on Gaia; only a handful of people know where the others are. I’m sure Iudicium isn’t one of them.”

“...It’s a start,” sighed Beatrix warily. “I thank you, your eminence. Okay, soldiers, I think it’s time we move out! Thanks to his eminence’s words, I now have a strong hunch that the enemy’s base is on this continent, or on an island very close by. I want twenty of you to go to the Shimmering Islands by boat and see what you can’t dig up. The rest of you, split up your forces and spread out all along the continent. Keep in touch with everyone via moogle.

I myself will search the foothills of the mountains. Is everything clear?”

“Aye, General!”

“Good. Well, don’t just stand around all day! Move out!”

“Aye!” Beatrix’s search party scrambled away into smaller units, and split up to look around for Iudicium’s hideout. The General sighed as she watched them go, and turned to thank the Bishop once more.

“A fine crew you have,” he noted, “and a fine General to command it. God be with you, my lady.”

“And you, eminence.”

The frozen wilderness of the Lost Continent called to Beatrix once again as she set out to look for Iudicium’s hideout. The information that Bishop Benedic had given her was crucial in her quest. His theory about the golems’ manufacturing origins had been well-thought out, and seemed to be based in logic and not a guess from a layman. The good Bishop knew his studies well; epicenters of magic seemed to be just one of his specialties.

It seemed logical to assume that where there was smoke, there was fire—or in this case, where there was a point of concentrated magic, there was going to be creatures created by the substance. Iudicium was powerful, but he was no mage, so he would have to hire somebody wise in the lore of golem-making in order to construct his army. The Bishop had added that there were four other points of extreme magical concentration in the world, but the Shimmering Islands was the one most people knew about.

Putting two and two together, Beatrix figured that her foe would be somewhere on the continent, or at least residing somewhere in the archipelagos that surrounded its southern border. She had a theory that he lived somewhere around either the Fire Sanctuary or Gurug Mountain, both places that contained a good source of warmth in such a chilling place. She had sent a few soldiers to look around the mountain, so she would be off towards the volcano.

And so, the endless fields of snow and ice became hers to trudge. If Beatrix had been less of a woman, she would have slowly lost her sanity as she shuffled her way through the cold desert. Her mind might have become as numb as the fingers and toes on her body, and her vision might have become

clouded from all the ice and snow that fell in her face. The Lost Continent was a freezing place, lost forever in white and snow and ice and cold, and it could take a person's sanity just as easily as a desert could.

But Beatrix was a big girl. It would take more than this desert of ice to make her lose her mind. Now, champagne with piece'a, on the other hand...

Suddenly, Beatrix came to a stop. Her boots froze, no pun intended, as she gazed in curious amazement at the object that had caught her eye. In the endless world of white and gray, a bit of black had stood out to her. She had left Esto Gaza behind about thirty minutes ago, so it was unlikely that this place was a city. Wondering what the object could be, and whether or not it had the capabilities to turn her into a snack, she carefully approached it with her sword drawn. The blade almost froze in the chilly weather, despite its ruby composition.

When Beatrix got closer to the black object, she realized that it was a fortress, and knew instantly that she had stumbled across the lair of Vikar Maoska Iudicium. She swallowed down all her fear and worries (for even she could be frightened), and with her sword still drawn, she walked towards the

fortress. It was a large thing, about half the size of Alexandria Castle, and its color was indeed black, or perhaps a very dark color of sickly blue-green. The stone on the fortress was covered with frozen moss, and the few windows that the place could boast looked more like eyes. There were a few red and white banners flapping in the breeze, and with the gigantic gate wide open, the place almost looked like some kind of demon, ready to devour anyone who got too close.

Boldly, Beatrix dared to enter the gate. She didn't question why it was open, especially in such disagreeable weather. A blessing like that was rare, and the knight had long ago learned to take such miracles without question. The transition from the chilly outside to the warm innards of the fortress was magnificent. Beatrix felt the cold of the outer world slowly slide off her body, and a warm feeling once again coming to her body. Yet she did not let out a sigh of relief, as that would let her guard down.

The gate did not close, so there was still a bitter wind howling at Beatrix's backside. She kept her warm clothes on just in case, and with her sword drawn and pointed in front of her, she carefully walked down the long hallway and into the belly of the fortress. Iudicium's hideout (if it was indeed that

very place) was exceptionally dark and frightening. There was no silence, as the howling of the wind seeped through the cracks and windows of the fortress, giving off the impression that there were ghosts wandering the place—or worse.

The great stone manor was so dark that once Beatrix lifted her foot, she did not know where, or upon what, it would set down upon. She could have sworn that there truly were restless spirits in the hallway: a chill crept up her spine, and the moaning of the wind outside began to sound more and more human, and in the faint distance, a faint movement in the darkness caused her pulse to skyrocket and her skin to burn with fear. She took a step back, held on tighter to her sword, and wished desperately for even a tiny shaft of light.

Beatrix's wish suddenly came true as she stood there transfixed. The sound of a flint being struck snapped into the air, and with it, the haunting glow of a single match's illumination filling the room. A small circle of light banished some of the darkness away, and when Beatrix took a few steps closer, she could see who it was that had given her light.

It was Vikar Maoska Iudicium, and he had on his face a smile as faint as the light he had created.

“Hello, General,” he said. “I have been expecting you. Please, if you don’t mind, put away that sword. I think we can both behave like civilized people for at least a few minutes, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I think I can *kill* you in a few minutes,” she snarled. “Wouldn’t *you* agree?”

“I’d really rather wait on that,” he sniffed. “In fact, to be honest, I’d rather not fight you at all.”

“What, are you afraid?” she scoffed.

“No, not in the least,” he replied. “If I was given the choice, I would actually be thrilled to test my skills against the mighty Beatrix of Alexandria. That *is* your name, isn’t it?”

“Yeah—so why are you not interested in fighting with me?”

“No reason,” he shrugged calmly. “I just really would rather not. Here, put away that sword, and join me for lunch. We can talk about things there. It is more comfortable at my dinner-table, Lady Beatrix, and I assure you that you would prefer it over standing here in this hallway, grasping a sword while perspiring under all that clothing. Why, it’s not even that cold outside!”

“What makes you think I’ll do any of that?” she growled, keeping her sword aimed right at him. Iudicium dusted his shoulder off, rubbed his chin, and bored his red eyes into Beatrix’s.

“Because I believe you are a civilized woman,” he said. “It is obvious that you are no barbarian. I could sense it, when we fought the other day. You were not fighting to eliminate a dangerous invader, you fought for what you believed in. I could tell. You, General, are a lot like myself, except for some obvious differences.”

“I am *nothing* like you, you butcher!”

“Whatever,” he sniffed. “In any case, please... I don’t want to fight you, and I will go to great lengths to avoid it. Truth be told, General, I actually respect you very much. Now come, put that sword away, and those winter clothes. My dining room is warm enough on its own.”

“I ought to kill you...”

“All in good time,” he said, dismissing her threats with a wave of his hand. “For now, please... Show me that you have some class in you. Join me for lunch, and we will discuss things. I promise, on my family crest and the blood of the Iudicium clan, I

will do you no harm while you are inside my home. After all, I *am* a member of the nobility, or I was. I would not sink to barbarism in my own home.... Very well. I shall be waiting for you in my dining-room. Just follow the torches and you shall find it.”

With that, Iudicium casually walked away, his hands clenched behind his back and his gate as sure as the sun. Beatrix scowled, but despite how depraved the man was, her code of honor forbade her to attack an unarmed opponent, and besides, Iudicium didn’t deserve the privilege of a quick death. So, reluctantly, Beatrix sheathed her sword, removed her outer gear, and followed Iudicium into his dining room. Her senses were on high alert, though, and she vowed to never, not even once, keep her eyes away from this man. She trusted a starving Quina to watch over a frog with broken legs more than she trusted this man.

Iudicium led Beatrix to his dining room, which truly was as ornate as he claimed it to be. Unlike the dark hallway she had previously been in, this new room was bright and cheerful with a great fire blazing in the furnace and several electric lights hanging up above. The dining table was quite long, and reeked of delicious cedar wood. There was a rich red tablecloth over the cedar that could have

served as a carpet in any other home; the carpet in that room was as thick and soft and inviting as moss, but in a rich blue color that suggested the highest class of nobility.

Beatrix had to admit that Iudicium certainly knew how to dine in style. The candelabras were made out of pure gold, and the dishes and plates were all made out of pure silver. The napkins alone could have fetched a hefty price in the Alexandrian market, and the chairs were made out of sturdy and strong wood, with cushions of velvet to soften the diner's bottoms. Beatrix didn't even want to consider what sort of delicacies Iudicium had cooking in his kitchen. The smell was so overpowering, it could have summoned a Qu from half a continent away.

"Please, be seated," said her host as he pulled out a chair for her. Beatrix didn't like to be served, at least by an enemy, but if Iudicium had wanted to fight her, he would have challenged her a long time ago. So, swallowing her pride a bit and trying to recall etiquette, Beatrix seated herself and allowed Iudicium a chair next to her.

"Our situation certainly is dreadful," he said as he seated himself. "I hope we can clear up all the misunderstandings between us. I never intended for

things to go so sourly. Dear General, I hope you will at least listen to what I have to say to you. I may ask for too much when I say I wish for you and I to get along, so all I can hope for is your audience. The food should be here any moment; I hope you like chardonnay and soft-shell crab.”

She said nothing.

A few moments later, a few cooks came into the room bearing a tiny feast in their arms. A medium-sized bowl of soup, just big enough for both of them to have a serving, was placed before them, and two rolls for each as well. Then came a small salad and a square of delicious parmesan lasagna, and for the main course, a big plate of soft-shelled crabs topped on rye bread, covered with potatoes. Chardonnay was poured into each of their glasses, and Iudicium gave Beatrix a thin smile as he raised his cup.

“To the future,” he said, “for no man can guarantee what sort of things will come of it.” Beatrix reluctantly made the toast, and took a sample of the fine wine. *Not bad..... well, actually, it is quite good. Quite good indeed.*

“My chefs prefer Esto Gaza cuisine,” mentioned Iudicium as he dug into his salad. “Soft-shelled crab is excellent this time of year. I tried to integrate

some of the more eastern dishes, like Conde Petie soup and Madain Sari potatoes, but chefs can be so adamant sometimes, wouldn't you agree?" A pause.

"I suppose."

"Dear me, General, do try to be less cautious," he smiled. "I assure you, I have no vile intentions. I truly do wish to make peace with you—"

"But not Alexandria." Beatrix turned her gaze straight at her host, and looked him in the eye as she demanded a response.

"...I had hoped that we could dodge that part of the conversation until after dinner," he muttered. "Really, General, deep down inside, I am not a barbarian. I know how I hurt you that other day, and how maniacal I seemed, but truth be told, I was perhaps overzealous because of what was happening. Tell me, General, have you ever been through the experience of losing your home to somebody completely insane and bent on power and greed?"

"...Actually, yes," she replied, "I have. I do know what that is like."

"Mm, so you were not born in Alexandria."

“No.”

“I see. Well then, we will be able to see eye-to-eye easier. Tell me, General, do you know who destroyed your hometown?”

“Yes,” she said as she drank her soup. “A man named Kyahar Ignus.”

“Oh, *him*. Well, that does explain a bit....Tell me, General, were you the one who killed him? I heard that he was impaled severely on an attempted attack on your kingdom.”

“I was partially responsible for his death,” she shrugged. “You can’t put all the credit on me. My friend Freya impaled him as well, with her spear.... She and I were childhood friends in my hometown.”

“I see...” He smiled at her, but grumbled slightly as he realized something. “Freya... oh dear... that was that Burmecian I saw, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah...”

“Do forgive me for that,” sighed Iudicium. “Had I known..... Well, it’s too late now. What’s done is done. But, I would like to make peace with her as well. If she is a friend of yours, General...”

“Cut the crap, Iudicium!” groaned Beatrix suddenly. “And get to the point! No more apologies, no more ‘civilized’ attempts at conversation, no more beating around the bush! You tell me why you invited me to this dinner, or else I’ll be tempted to forget my civility!” Iudicium stared at Beatrix for a long time after she stopped speaking, and slowly began to chew his salad as he thought. Beatrix had an extremely impatient and slightly angry look on her face; she had not touched her main course.

“...All right,” he said, “I’ll cut straight to the chase. Lady Beatrix, do you know what is most important to you? Do you know what one thing you would protect with your very life? Do you hold something so high above you that you would sacrifice everything to keep it safe?”

“Yes I would, Iudicium,” she replied. “The Kingdom of Alexandria, and all its people, and all its allies, are all very dear to me. King Zidane, Queen Garnet, Captain Steiner, chef Quina, Dragoon Freya... they are all very dear to me. I would give my life for every single one of them. My love for my kingdom, which has sheltered me and taken me in when I was all alone, cannot be measured by any means; it cannot be fathomed. Sir, and I use that term sparingly, Alexandria means more to me than

my own soul. There is nothing else I love or envy so much.”

A pause.

“I see.” Iudicium carefully cut apart his crab so he could eat it, and continued to dine while thinking about what Beatrix had told him. The General, feeling a slight grumbling in her stomach, finally decided to eat as well. She did not know when she would next have a meal, let alone a meal this good, so she savored every bit of it, including the entire glass of chardonnay she had.

“So that is why you fought,” he whispered suddenly. Beatrix looked up from her crab.

“...Yes. That is why I fought. But I also fought for justice, for what was right—not just for those I loved. Vikar Iudicium, I do not know your mind, nor your past, but from what you have already revealed, it seems you hold some unfair, long-standing grudge against the place that I call home.”

“Not *seems*, General—I do indeed,” he stated coldly. “And let me tell you, General, my feelings towards your kingdom equate on the same level as yours for Ignus. Put yourself once again in your childhood shoes. Think back to the very day that

Ignus destroyed your town, and killed your loved ones, leaving only you and your friend to live.

“Now think about all the years you spent after that, wallowing in hatred and fear for that man. Think about how you used to wake up at night, still hearing the screams, still seeing the burnt bodies trying to crawl to safety. Think about how Ignus’ men would have raped and slaughtered the women, and how they must have defiled your honorable mother, and perhaps a sister or two. Think about that horror once more, General!

“Because that is the same terror I know, the same nightmare that I have been through ever since that dark day so long ago! To leave a land that was prosperous and good, and full of just people who never caused anybody any wrong, and to leave that land thinking that it will all be there when you return, only to come back to a land of smoke and ashes! The only remnant of my hometown was a blackened earth, destroyed by fire and villainy and evil sorcery! To come back to a land where you are the only one left to grieve, where everything you have worked for, everything that you have built up, everything you ever loved... has *vanished* before your eyes!!

“And try, dear General, to feel how one must react to such a dreadful sight! Would I, who was the man who suffered so, would I not have the right to seek vengeance, and would I not have the right to seek justice, and would I not have the right to see to it that such dastardly evil was put in the grave, and into Hell, where they would feel my same suffering for all eternity?!?! *Would I not have that right!!??*”

Silence.

For a long time, Beatrix gazed at Iudicium, and watched as his once-lively and animated face slowly calmed down again. He had ranted and raved passionately for quite some time, almost to the point of frothing at the mouth, but what he had said rang true to Beatrix. Why, if she had been in his same situation, she would have been no less enraged!

She thought long and hard over what he had said. It was true that there was a great injustice to the situation, and that he did indeed have a cause for retribution, and he might have even had the right to step out and seek justice. Such strife was undeserving, especially to one who had done nothing to incur it, and for awhile, Beatrix felt pity and remorse for the man. She had, after all, been a part of the monarchy that destroyed him, and the

humane side of her wanted to reach out and do anything she could to help.

“I think I understand now,” she said softly. “And to tell you the truth, sir, I agree. You do have the right to seek revenge, and to have justice meted out on those who have destroyed everything near and dear to you. I understand your rage, and your hatred, and your unquenchable desire to wipe out those who have caused you such trouble. I understand all too well...”

“So we are agreed!” he exclaimed. Beatrix took a long time to think out the answer to that difficult statement.

“In a sense, yes. But where I agree that you have the right to destroy what has caused you so much trouble—for I will not be a hypocrite by saying that you need to love your enemies—I do not support what you have done in order to meet your goals.”

“Eh? What do you mean? Explain!”

“I mean this,” she sighed. “Lord Iudicium, you have invaded a kingdom that has reformed its evil ways. It is no longer the power-hungry center of malice that destroyed your home. The former Queen has been killed, a victim of her own selfish desires.

She has received her justice, and rests now with the weight of all her misdoings pressing down on her tomb. But the kingdom you invaded was a new place, with new people and new ideals, and a new Queen who has stood strong and proud through the worst tests that life could throw at her, including yourself.

“Lord Iudicium, you say that it is wrong for evil to destroy good, but tell me: is it no less wrong for *good* to destroy good? You say that your land was unjustly destroyed and that your life was wiped out, but you have invaded a land that was good, and which did you no harm, and whose citizens were innocent of any malice, and whose Queen was guilty of no crime. Yes, it is true that you deserve your revenge, but Lord Iudicium, your revenge has already been meted out. Alexandria was purified by fire long ago, and it has stood the test of time and endured through the flames. Lord Iudicium, you have attempted to destroy a phoenix.”

Again, silence. This time, Iudicium was the one who did the thinking.

“Then I see that we do not agree,” he sighed after a lengthy pause. “Your ideals and mine differ completely, I see. You want to protect your home,

and I want to destroy it. Dear General, let me assure you that I am not a barbarian by saying that I respect your opinion, and your ideals, and your love for your country. You would not be human if you had not these qualities.

“But, dear Lady, you must now also respect *my* opinions and beliefs, and the love I held for *my* own country. I have just as much right to that as you do.”

“Indeed you do,” she replied. “But I do not support the mass slaughter you have initiated. That, I cannot applaud. I cannot even endure it, and for attacking innocent people, and injuring my beloved Queen without good cause, I must therefore execute you.”

“And I, with you now in my way, must bid you good evening.” Iudicium carefully wiped his mouth and stood up, allowing his chefs to take the food away. ‘I thank you for listening to me, at least,’ he said as he left the dining room, “and for the conversation. I truly enjoyed it, General, I honestly did. Please, if you will, step outside for a moment. Make sure you take your clothes and your sword with you, now—we wouldn’t want you leaving them here by accident.”

Beatrix, not knowing what the man was planning, carefully stood out of her seat, and followed him out of the merry dining room and back into the hallway, where they had met. Along the way, she plucked her clothes up off the ground, and made sure her sword-belt was tightened. She had a feeling that Iudicium didn't just want to wish her farewell and good fortune.

Iudicium took Beatrix outside his manor, back into the chilly cold she had left an hour or so ago. The wind was dead now, and the snow had stopped falling, revealing a wintry wonderland full of purity, a bright sun above, and a frosty wind that gnawed at her exposed skin. There was nothing more pure and fresh than that afternoon on the Lost Continent—a perfect scene for what seemed to be the final confrontation between Beatrix and Iudicium.

“Take a look at this pure world around you!” he exclaimed with a wave of his hand. “Have you ever seen such exquisite beauty elsewhere in nature? Have you ever been in the midst of such majesty? For ‘even Solomon, in all his splendor, could not compare to one of these’!”

“What’s your game, Iudicium?” grunted Beatrix. He sniffled and smiled at her.

“My game? I don’t think you’re naïve enough to ask what my ‘game’ is, General. You know just as well as I do. Your main concern is whether or not you still have a mind left to be changed—but knowing you, you shall remain adamant on your decision to protect Alexandria.”

“And you’ll stick to destroying it, am I right?”

“Rightly so,” he commented dryly. “Listen, General, I do not wish to fight you, for I truly harbor great respect for you. Aside from that blasted girl, and perhaps that friend of yours, you were the only one in that whole kingdom who could fight me on equal terms. I admit, I went all-out when I fought against you, General. Finding such a warrior truly is remarkable.

“But if you continue to protect Alexandria, as I know in my heart you will, then I have no choice but to eliminate you. You said yourself that you should kill me. Well, I know you will not let me leave this frozen land alive, and since you are a bother to me now, we can both agree that a duel to the bitter death will be the only way to finish things.”

Beatrix nodded her head.

“A duel to the death... Only one makes it out alive... Yes, I think I can do that...” With a flair, Beatrix threw her baggy warm clothes to the side, and drew her sword from out of its sheath. The cold air of the Lost Continent bit her skin for only a little while, then the rush of an adrenaline flow and the anxiety of a battle warmed her all over. Yes—a fight to the death seemed in order.

“I defeated you in your hometown, albeit narrowly,” said Iudicium as he drew his own immense sword. “What chances do you think you have against me now, in what remains of my territory?”

“Ah, but I was not giving everything I had back then,” said Beatrix slyly. “If I had fought you at my full capacity, there would not be enough left of you to fill a thimble. Of course, half the kingdom might have been turned into ruins, so...”

“You cannot possibly be that powerful,” he scoffed darkly. Beatrix grinned.

“I had a very good teacher. Perhaps you’ve heard of him: Master Atma?”

“Ah, that explains a bit,” stated Iudicium, a look of surprise clear on his face. “No wonder you gave

me such a hard time. Yes, yes... I believe you when you say that you had the power to stop me. Plus, you were only using one of your eyes in that fight. Now it seems you have both.”

“And nobody around to get in the way,” she snarled coolly. The look of an animal was on the General’s pretty face; Iudiciu merely smiled, though he had to admit that he was a bit uneasy.

“Well, it seems we may be evenly-matched again,” he said. “I suppose there is only one way to find out. *En garde!*” Vikar Iudiciu suddenly lunged towards Beatrix with his immense sword, and the most vicious battle the General had ever suffered through began with a thunderous clang as his blade met hers.

The endless waltz of insufferable war caused the heavens above to bear its sons of thunder and lightning to strike down without mercy as two great warriors fought on the frozen field of purity. The great earth below moaned, and became tempted to belch out its offspring, that of fire and flame, onto the land, so it could at least control those who would continue the everlasting dance of hatred and revenge—but the blood of the earth was not spilled.

Two giant blades of steel, or perhaps better material, met and met again, and dashed themselves upon each other like the hammer of a smith against the anvil—again and again, creating similar sparks as the metal struck upon metal, forging from fires and letting the insane ringing shatter all of reality with its noise. The sons of heaven, the thunderbolts, rained down upon the smith's hammer to aid him in his quest to forge weapons; one of the warriors fought as such a thunder.

And the earth, the land below, that which gave birth to creatures Living, spewed up from its mouth the blood it held, its sons called magma and hot metal, and were poured out onto the anvil for the smith to strike. Heaven soared into his hammer, electrocuting it to the point of an explosion, and such a tool was raised and flung down towards the earth, which had vomited out its own blood for the heavens to mold.

STRIKE! went the hammer, and heaven and earth met in a terrible roar, and the swords of the two warriors met in a similar fashion, and not even the rage of heaven or the rage of earth could match up to such blood and insanity that had been dancing all that time, somewhere in between the forces of Ten and Chi. It was a battle, an actual war, and

something so terrifying and glorious that to put its true splendor and savagery into form, one must only look to poetry, for nothing else could record such a duel.

The two fighters, the two fates who battled each other, were each fighting for what their hearts and their souls cried out for, not for the whim of a King or the command of an Emperor. The Judicial one, tall and regal like a nobleman should be, wielded his massive blade for his own land, his own honor, and fought against his enemy like a true warrior, a true nobleman, a true person who had nothing left to fight for but his own pride, and the constant reminder that there was vengeance to seek out.

The other fighter, or fate as it were, was a feminine General, weathered by time and war and strife and joy and life. She also had reasons to battle back against her foe, for her own honor and pride and homeland were at stake. It was her kingdom they fought over, the one that had caused so much joy and sorrow, the epicenter for such bloodshed and so many new lives being born, the place that held love and hate together, and forced them to mix at certain times.

Smash! Clang! Crash! Bang! Thwack! Thunk! Swoop!

The sounds their blades made as they burned through the air was like listening to two choirs, competing for a top spot. One choir was a heavenly host, of angels and purity and the light, and one was a more hellish presentation, with violence and blood and destruction. But there was no way to tell which warrior caused which choir to sing out more: they were both fighting for what they felt was right, and they both fought viciously, and the great chorus and the great waltz of endless war continued on.

If an observer had been there, they would truly liken the fight to a dance, and not a duel. To observe this Beatrix and this Iudicium fighting each other (over what they held most dear to their hearts), one would think they had choreographed it for a ballet, not a massacre. Both warriors leaped and soared into the air, like flying Valkyries and not mortals; they swung their swords like artists, not fighters; the way they reeled after every attack, and the way they fell down to the ground, and the way they got back up to fight again...

Such splendor truly had never before been seen in the world, so of course it was likened to a dance, and

to a ballet, and to poetry. There laid both beauty and horror in that Ballet of War: music, from their heavenly and earthly swords crashing together; color, from the blood and sweat and the sparks that flew out; song, from the screams they cried out and the groans of pain and the growls of vengeance when an injury was struck.

Sword flew upon sword, a thousand times over. Two bodies twirled and spun through the fields of purest snow. Sparks exploded out when the blades met, the smithy struck again and again, heaven and earth trembled and grumbled as it both observed the fight and carried it on its shoulders. All creation seemed to pause, just to see who would win in this epic battle. It was sword against sword, strength versus strength, pride and pride, honor and honor, vengeance and vengeance, value versus value, heart and heart, mind and mind, soul against soul.

It might even be said that the Creator of that world paused, for just a moment, to see the Ballet.

This war, or ballet, or however it was addressed, would have become indefinite, except for the fact that the only participants were neither angels nor demons nor Valkyries, nor anything of supernatural power. They were both mortal human beings,

composed of skin, flesh, bone, hair, and blood, and they were susceptible to death and injury and defeat as any of their kin. Wounds opened up, bruises were inflicted, buckets of perspiration fell down their faces and soaked their clothes, and the chill of the cold environment was constantly biting at their bodies.

Thus far, the fight was going into its first hour. For an entire hour, and no less, Beatrix and Iudicium had been dancing in the magnificent and bloody Ballet of War, and had inflicted victories and pains upon one another until their bodies screamed out for them to stop. But as their flesh was weak, their spirits were becoming mightier by the minute, and after every brief rest, they would only pick up their swords and do battle against each other again. The two of them had fought for their very lives, and more, for an hour now—no, it was becoming longer by the moment.

By now, the General was bloodied up and extremely weary from her fight—but Iudicium didn't look unscathed, either. They were both kneeling on the ground, letting their blood and sweat soak down into the snow, melting it flake by flake and coloring it with droplets of red. Their breathing came out in great gasps, floating up into the crystal-

blue sky like ghosts being exorcised from their bodies. Every muscle in Beatrix's body felt like it had been taxed to its last limit, but neither warrior was dead yet, and thus, the battle would continue.

I can't beat this guy! she snarled to herself. *He's too much for me! I don't want to admit it, but he's the stronger of us two. If I don't pull out something and fast, then he's going to spread his terror into Alexandria, and perhaps the rest of the world! I can barely even see because of all the blood and sweat, but if I don't stand up to fight, then...*

Beatrix wiped her face clean of the liquid that had gathered around it, whether it be crimson or clear, and took a few cleansing breaths as she stared at her foe. He was taking a brief rest as well, so if she wanted to finish things, now would have been the time.

Can't use my forbidden skills on him, she reasoned. *The Rage of Ten and the Rage of Chi would definitely destroy him, but it would probably crack this continent wide open. Who knows how much of it is made out of ice! No, I'd better not risk it. There's always my third skill, but I was hoping I'd never have to use it. Not even Master Atma could*

control its deadly power, so what chance to I have...?

Oh well, no wondering about things now. I said I'd give my life for Alexandria, so I guess now's the time I prove my claim. Forgive me, my master, but this could not be avoided. There's... no other way. I'm sorry... And forgive me, Freya, if this skill destroys my body. I want you to know that I love you, and I wish we had gotten to spend more of our youth together. If I die, I'll tell Sir Fratley about you. Garnet, Zidane, please don't mourn my passing if this kills me. I died as I should have, protecting the land that I love so desperately. Steiner... I wish I had more time to..... say some things I should have said to you a long time ago.

Mother, father, watch over me!

Silently, Beatrix dropped her sword to the ground, and kicked it away from her. At first, Iudicium thought she was surrendering, but the determined look on the General's face said that her fight was far from over. With her teeth clenched tightly and her crimson eyes on fire, Beatrix tightened her fists, braced her body, and prepared for the most lethal and most forbidden of all her secret techniques.

“I summon the skill that holds control over life itself,” she chanted. “I call forth energies deep within my own soul, to aid and strengthen my weary body. I sacrifice all for this means, I gladly forfeit my own life to attain this necessity, and I shall put my very soul on the line to accomplish my sworn duty...”

“What... are you muttering?” whispered Iudicium. Beatrix completely ignored him.

“I invoke the energies within to empower me and to give me strength unheard-of. Grant unto me, O My Soul, your own Self, that I may do away with this evil! I summon... my third and most lethal forbidden skill!” And with her concentration at an acme, her face darkened by the powers she was drawing, and her voice husky, she uttered the name of her skill:

“...The Attack That Has No Name...” Instantly, a flash of brilliant light overcame the General, and a mighty blue fire, more intense than the docile volcano not too far away from them, ignited her body in a brilliant blaze. Iudicium’s face exploded into a mask of horror as the aura of power and light surrounded Beatrix, but considering the powers she was emanating, he had good reason to worry.

“Dear Lord!” he hissed. “It can’t be!” For a brief moment, Beatrix allowed Iudicium to wallow in this new emotion called fear, and without wasting any more seconds after that, she blazed towards him like a firebird, and with the screech of a thousand wildcats, she slammed her fist against his head and sent him soaring into the distance.

Instantly, Beatrix flew off after him, going so blindingly fast that she broke the speed barrier and created a sonic boom. She easily caught up with her soaring foe, and before he could even touch the ground, she slammed her foot into his body and sent him crashing to the heavens. She leaped off after him, ripping the sky apart with a speed and power unknown to physical science, and before Iudicium could be shot into the stratosphere, she reached his level, curled both fists into a powerful ball, and slammed it against his stomach, sending him plummeting to the ground like a meteor.

Iudicium crashed into the snowy ground, breaking about half the bones in his body upon impact, his mighty sword along with them, and ripping more than one muscle to shreds. Beatrix was not through with him yet, and like an angel of justice, she tore off after him, screaming like a jet. Iudicium was too weak to even groan, yet as he saw

Beatrix soaring towards him at a breakneck speed, the most he could do was roll away and hope to avoid her destructive blow.

Beatrix just barely missed splitting the man in two with her attack. Instead, she cracked the ground wide open, nearly sending a small piece of the continent floating into the ocean. The gaping hole created by her single attack went deep and far; one had to consider what would have happened if Vikar hadn't rolled away at the last second.

Such was the power of this most amazing and most forbidden skill, the one that bore no name.

Iudicium was able to climb back to his knees, but he was so bloodied and beaten that to be alive was a miracle for him. Beatrix's rage increased and the blue flame surrounding her body burned even brighter, and she stepped in for the kill. But before she could strike one last time, the fires suddenly died down. The General lurched, grimaced, and screamed out in agony, and fell to the floor in a smoking heap. Even as her body, mind, and soul went through centuries' worth of pain, one thought crossed her mind.

No! Not now! NO!!

A long, long, long period of silence and inactivity passed, as Iudicium's bloody body managed to stand up in the snow, and Beatrix's smoking remains remained still. A foul odor came from the General as the black smoke rose from her body, almost as if she were a burning piece of meat, and for the longest time, only the wind could be heard, and the great gasping coming from the severely-wounded Iudicium.

...What happened? he thought to himself. Surely she is not doing this as a strategy! The General knows that I am still alive, despite what she threw at me. Just one hit, even from a weakling, would put me in my grave! She had the upper hand! So why not end my life?! She cannot...

...Unless...

“Ah, I understand now!” he exclaimed. “I understand! I remember what that technique does to people! Yes, yes... No wonder Atma feared it so! That technique, the one that has no name, it drains you of your life energy, doesn't it?”

Silence.

“Doesn't it, General?!”

“It’s a sacrifice,” came the strained voice of Beatrix. She was barely alive enough to speak; she could not even roll over so her face was out of the snow. “The user... takes... their own life energy... and... adds it to... their current strength. They... become... a living ‘Atma Weapon’, capable of indescribable..... indescribable power, speed, and ability. But... the longer you use it... the more energy... it takes...”

“And you were desperate enough to use it on *me!*” Iudicium chuckled darkly, and applauded Beatrix for her marvelous display of such a dangerous power. “Bravo, bravo! Indeed, General, you *are* remarkable! Perhaps only your beloved Master could hold that technique for as long as you did, without fainting from extreme lack of energy. But bah, you must be feeling rather destroyed now, no? Why, using up all that energy, even during a short amount of time, should be very deadly indeed! And after our first battle, you must not have had that much to spare!”

“...No,” groaned Beatrix softly, “but... it was enough... to beat you...”

“And now you can’t move a muscle, am I right?”

Silence.

“Of course. Well now, this is a great turn of events. My sword is shattered to pieces, and my body with it, and you threw yours away, and you’re not fit to give chase to a rock. Once again, Lady Beatrix, we are even.

“...Except,” he added darkly, “I can still walk. I have just enough strength left in me to walk over to your body, pick up what remains of my sword, and kill you in a single blow. Yes... In fact, I think this is what I’m going to do.” He smiled at her, though she couldn’t see it, and with the agonizing deliberation of a nobleman ready to kill his next enemy, Vikar Iudicium trudged towards Beatrix’s destroyed body. With a single kick, he flipped her over so she was looking up, and not face-first in the snow like an ignoble dog.

“I can at least let you die with some honor,” he said bitterly. “You deserve that much. Do not move, General; I shall try to aim for your heart. That way, you will die with little pain. I still respect you enough to give you a mercy killing.” Calmly, quietly, coldly, Iudicium foraged around the fields of snow for a piece of his sword that was still intact, and found the hilt still clinging onto a sharp fraction of the blade.

“This will do,” he said. The weapon was no longer a sword—it was barely even a weapon at all—but with the sharp, thin remnant of a blade still lodged in, it could still do the job. Beatrix had fought long and hard, perhaps *too* hard, against an opponent that truly was her better, and because of her most recent attack, she found that she could no longer move, not even to save herself, not even to weep out in sorrow. She could do nothing, even as Iudicium took the blade in his hands and raised it up the sky, and thrust it towards the ground she had been resting on.

The heavens trembled, and the universe remained as cold and as empty as ever...

The sound of the surf, of waves lapping up against the puttering boat, and of gulls cawing above, were all parts of a delightful symphony of sound that would lull anybody to sleep. Adding the warmth and the golden light that the sun gave, and one could understand why the passengers on the small ship felt drowsy. It was a peaceful day, a wonderful contrast to what had been going on just the other week. But nobody complained—such a time of peace and relaxation had been earned.

Everyone on that ship was determined to soak up as much of the music and the sun and the gentle breeze as they could.

Freya Crescent was no exception. Her eyes were closed, allowing the sun's rays to bask on her lids as she gently reclined on a chair. The ship's rocking was like a cradle, and she a baby again, and the lullaby was the soft sound of gulls crying overhead, and the lapping of the waves beneath. She truly was at peace here, and for more reasons than one. Yes, the scenery was magnificent, but there was something else that made her heart soar. She sighed, taking in a deep breath as she stretched, and yawned once before smiling at the figure not too far away from her.

"I still can't believe it," she said dreamily. "I expect to wake up any moment now, and find myself on that field, all bloodied up and beaten, and barely conscious enough to breathe. I never thought..." She trailed off, chuckled, shook her head, and told the other person to forget about it.

"Just rest for now," he advised her. "Just let this moment be in your mind for a little while longer. It's so beautiful outside, and the sea's swaying so gently..." She smiled beautifully as he nearly keeled

over from drowsiness himself, and with clarity and fondness, Freya recalled how her life had gotten a little more magnificent in only a short period of time...

She had been lying in that barren field for some time now, forgotten by those still in the village of summoners. The horrifying battle had been disastrous, and it had taken everything Freya could offer to conclude it in her favor. Yet now, she was so spent and exhausted that all she could do was lie down in the dirt, and drift off into unconsciousness, and hope that, if she were to die, it would be a painless and honorable death. She barely had enough of a brain remaining to reason why so many monstrous characters were after her, but she theorized that they had all been sent by Iudicium.

And so, with no more energy in her body than a rock, Freya could do nothing except lie there, and hope to at least have a good sleep. She stayed there on that field for a long time, perhaps hours on end, dreaming about everything and nothing at all. A noise made her wake up—a soft, shuffling noise, like the kind a person would make when they walked over rocks. Freya stirred as the noise grew closer,

but she was so tired that she couldn't even move to see what was making it.

If it was a predator or a scavenger, she would not have the energy needed to ward it off...

The noise came close to her, and then stopped. She ached to be able to see who or what it was, but no force on Gaia could make her move. Her vision was blurred slightly because of her most recent battle, so she could not see who had approached her. The person gazed down at her, appeared to smile, and crouched down close to Freya's face. He gently began to stroke her silvery hair, which felt tremendous to a weary body such as hers.

"Hey, pretty lady," he said gently, and instantly, Freya knew who had spoken. She had kept that voice locked in her mind for ages, holding it close to her heart and making its pure sound last as long as her memory would allow. Her smile grew large, and her eyes grew merry, yet though she knew who this was, only one conclusion could be given to it.

"Fratley... How?...Oh... I must be in Heaven... Dear man, am I dead?"

"If you are, then you're an angel," he replied. The man leaned down and kissed her cheek,

drinking up the tears that had trickled down there. “But as the holy scriptures say, there shall be no tears in Heaven. I believe, my love, that you are very much alive.”

“But... how is that possible?” she whispered. “You... you are dead, are you not?” The man before her, who seemed to be a realistic apparition of her long-lost love Fratley, smiled sadly as he combed his fingers through her hair.

“Death has no hold on love,” he replied. “Darling Freya, I have indeed been embraced by the hands of the Reaper, yet by the mercy of the Creator Himself, I am alive and well, very well. Oh, my darling, how I have missed you...” Fratley shivered with delight, and nearly burst into tears himself as he buried his face in Freya’s shoulder, and began to nuzzle her neck just the way she remembered.

A million thoughts, questions, horrors, and hopes flew through the dragoon’s mind as she rested there, and with an expression going beyond shock, she managed to sit up and look her ghostly love square in the eye. She stared at him with a look more terrified than she thought possible, and dared to hope that the impossible was true. Suddenly, her stomach groaned out to her in pain, and she looked

down to see that a bit of blood was still trickling out of her wounds.

“I’m alive,” she whispered. Her evergreen eyes bored into Fratley, and with her hands, she gently touched his cheeks. Carefully, she pulled on his furry flesh, stretching it out until he let out a small yelp.

“Ow!”

“Sorry...” she muttered. He grinned at her, and to prove he was real, he gave her a kiss that had been years overdue.

“So does that convince you, love?” he asked. “Do you believe that I am real?”

“Oh... Fratley...” Freya, too overcome with emotion and disbelief, could do little else except faint again. She fell towards the ground and passed out, and poor Fratley had to revive her again before their “reunion” could resume.

Silently, Freya and Fratley began to walk back to Madain Sari, trying to avoid as much of the destroyed area around them as possible. The fight with Metatron had devastated a portion of the land—the gaping chasm that was now part of the landscape was just one aftereffect of the battle—and so the two of them had to tread carefully. As they

made their way back to the village of summoners, Freya and Fratley had a very long, very thorough, and very intimate conversation.

“I still don’t believe it,” said Freya as she stepped over a boulder (Fratley had to support her most of the time, since she was still weak from the fight). “I personally saw you receive a mortal wound. I could have sworn that you had died. I just don’t understand how you could still be living.”

“Well, I would first thank the God of this world,” said Fratley as he removed a few pebbles from the path. “After all, there are no miracles without Him. But to be honest, Freya, I thought that you had been the one who died. I saw you receive more injuries than anyone else there, except for the beasts we killed. It seems, though, that you have lived through that ultimate crisis, and for that, I am eternally glad.

“As for myself—yes, you could say that I did come very close to death at that time. I honestly felt myself being carried by angels as I ascended into Heaven. But by the grace of some unknown power, I was able to escape that city with my life—no, wait, I do remember who saved me. It was a Qu. Yes, yes, I remember now.”

“A Qu?” parroted Freya. “Who was it?”

“A doctor,” smiled Fratley, “and a very skilled one. I believe its name was... Dr. Quban.”

“Well, that does explain a bit,” grinned Freya slightly. Fratley gazed at her with innocent eyes.

“Eh? Why’s that? Do you know him?”

“Yes, a little. I never would expect Dr. Quban to be responsible for healing my beloved—but even more strange is the fact that s/he never mentioned you!” Fratley shrugged, and helped Freya over a large mound of dirt that had been flung in the battle.

“Well, you know Qus. Always muttering about food and things.”

“Yes, I do know them quite well. Say, Fratty, forgive me for asking, but...”

“Oh, is it about my memory?” he interrupted. Freya’s face beamed with amazement, and her eyes sparkled like true emeralds. She smiled, and nodded her head. ‘I don’t know how to explain it,’ he replied, “but somehow, that battle that nearly killed me brought everything back. I must have been knocked out really well for something like that to happen. Just as amnesia may be inflicted by heavy trauma, it was the theory of Dr. Quban that it can be cured through the same means.”

“So... does that mean...?” The wildest of all hopes flew in Freya’s heart, and she dared to believe that all her dreams were becoming real.

“It means, darling, that my love for you remains ever-true.” He drew her in for a powerful embrace, holding the woman who had been a part of his entire life, and who had been like a ghost to his forgotten thoughts. “And I shall never leave you, darling, never again. I vow, on my own family’s name, that I shall never stray from your side again. I have already learned the errors of my ways before; I shan’t test fate a third time. From now on, Freya, my home is wherever you live.” She grinned at him, too happy to even speak, and since nothing else needed to be done, she decided to show her love through physical actions, and gave him a kiss that he would certainly never forget.

“Nasty place,” growled Fratley as he led Freya across the blasted plains. “What on Gaia happened here?! It looks like there was a terrible lightning storm. For that matter, why were you lying down when I found you? Freya, I thought you were dead! You nearly gave me a scare!” She merely gave him a weak smile, perhaps too overjoyed at reuniting with him to do anything else.

“It’s nothing,” she said, “just a battle.”

“Oh.” He paused, and lifted her arm on his shoulder again as he helped her walk. “That suddenly explains everything. Knowing your skills, all this disheveled scenery suddenly makes sense.”

“I’m not that powerful, Fratty!” she grinned. He smiled back at her, fond memories resurfacing as he gazed into her face. In his mind, she had only gotten prettier with age, and stronger—not just physically, but mentally and emotionally and even spiritually. She was indeed something of a goddess to him, a woman named after a deity of Love, yet as powerful as the grandest of warriors. She was beautiful, and since he wanted to, he gave her a tender embrace.

She accepted without hesitation.

“What was that for?” she whispered. He sighed, and rested his chin on her shoulder.

“I missed you, my dear Freya.” She smiled, and kissed his cheek, still overwhelmed at having him back after all this time.

“I missed you as well, dear man.”

“I still can’t believe it,” Freya said dreamily as she addressed Fratley. “I expect to wake up any moment now, and find myself on that field, all bloodied up and beaten, and barely conscious enough to breathe. I never thought...” She trailed off, chuckled, shook her head, and told her beloved to forget about it.

“Just rest for now,” he advised her. “Just let this moment be in your mind for a little while longer. It’s so beautiful outside, and the sea’s swaying so gently...” She smiled beautifully as he nearly keeled over from drowsiness himself, and with clarity and fondness, Freya recalled how her life had gotten a little more magnificent in only a short period of time...

“Strange...” she murmured. “...but I’m not complaining. Dear Fratley, my life could not get any more perfect, unless the two of us were at home again.”

“Alexandria, right?” he asked. She affirmed it, and Fratley gazed out at the empty blue sea, seeing nothing but the ocean and the sky. “Well, we still have a long way to go. Just rest for now, dear woman. Rest your body, and your mind, and let your dreams become real.” She smiled at him, and folded

her hat over so that the brim was covering her eyes. A few moments later, Fratley decided to join her, so that when she woke, she would know for certain that she had not been dreaming.

It took them awhile, but Freya and Fratley finally made it to the shores of Alexandria. The soldiers gathered on the boat, and all the other boats in the convoy, let out a riotous cheer as they spotted their homeland, and Freya's smile became magical as she clasped her hand over Fratley's, and spotted that beautiful land which even she called home.

"Looks like the place is still standing," she mentioned. He nodded his head silently, and as the ships all docked in, there was little said between the two Burmecian dragoons. They were merely content to be in the company of each other, as well as all the relieved soldiers there on the boat. For the time being, everything was absolutely perfect.

Garnet and Zidane personally welcomed the convoy back to the kingdom, and as they saw Freya standing beside Fratley, with her face aglow with love and happiness, they couldn't help but become overjoyed with her. They both embraced their dear friend, and even Fratley, whose sudden appearance was as much of a surprise to them as it had been

with Freya. The dragoon merely explained that “he had a new lease on life”, and that any further details would just be a waste of breath to explain. Neither Garnet nor Zidane were ready to deny her any happiness she was getting from the moment.

After the royals greeted Freya and Fratley, Steiner and the Pluto Knights came up next, and gave the usual reports. Since Eiko and Mikoto were unavailable at the moment, representatives from Madain Sari and the Black Mage Village informed the King and Queen of the statistics. When everything was pieced together, it seemed as if the campaign to wipe out Vikar Iudicium had been a success. However, there was no cause for celebration just yet.

A week later, however, the crew from Esto Gaza sailed in, bearing news that Iudicium’s fortress had been discovered and subsequently destroyed. Iudicium himself was nowhere to be found, but it was assumed that he had perished while the fortress was being attacked. Parts of the man’s sword had been discovered just outside the fortress, and the forensics experts available stated that there had been droplets of blood that were found in the snow, and most of it matched up with Iudicium’s. The man, it seemed, had died battling a terrible enemy, and since

there was no evidence claiming that he was still alive, it was then concluded that the entire campaign had been a success.

Because of such a stunning victory against such a powerful foe, a grand celebration was proclaimed throughout the land. A great parade filed through the kingdom, featuring all the soldiers who had fought against the persistent enemy. Steiner and Freya were at the front with the King and Queen, both of whom were looking overjoyed that such a foe had been defeated.

There was confetti and crowds, screaming and dancing, singing and drinking, with everybody celebrating like the end of the world had just been postponed indefinitely. The great war with the great enemy was finally over, and the dead could rest in ease, and the living could be honored, and the victims could be comforted. It was a wild and glorious time for everybody, on many different levels, and the celebration would go on for many more days to come.

Finally, it seemed as if every threat to the good kingdom had been taken care of. Kuja and Garland could do no more harm to it. The Foe was gone, Kyahar Ignus had been eradicated, and the

grandmaster behind such villains (or so it was theorized) had gone with them as well. There would still be evils in the world, sure, but none of them would have the terror, might, and influence of these past villains. Truly, an era of peace had at long last fallen upon Alexandria, and considering what the kingdom had just been through, it needed it.

Still... there was something missing from all the festivities... Something important, something Freya just couldn't put her finger on...

Beatrix.

She had not come back with the troops from Esto Gaza.

So, the question was, where was she?

Freya felt ashamed for realizing the absence so late. Even though there had been so much going on, what with the sudden appearance of her beloved Fratley, the apparent victory over Iudicium, and the celebratory party afterwards, she *should have* noticed the loss of her closest friend. Of course, it was only human (or in her case, Burmecian) to forget things here and there, especially during times

of great activity or stress. Once Freya was able to get some time to think, her thoughts went to Beatrix, and the question of where her friend was.

Her first inclination was to ask the soldiers that had came back from the Lost Continent, which was where the holy knight had been stationed. But they were of no help—every single one of them thought that their General had been on another boat, or else hidden from view once they returned home. But no matter how badly Beatrix performed at loud, crowded, and festive celebrations, she *would have* been there somewhere. If nothing else, she would have given a status report to the Queen, but Garnet hadn't seen her, either.

Freya began to grow worried about her friend. If the soldiers from Esto Gaza didn't see her, and if Garnet didn't see her, then where could she have gone? Most every man and woman that had been deployed was accounted for, whether dead or alive, except for Amarant's group, and Beatrix wouldn't have been anywhere near their position. Freya was starting to conclude the worst, and so with nothing to reaffirm her thoughts, she turned to her dear Fratley.

“It’s a wonderful place you have here,” he said suddenly. Freya had barely put her feet through the door, and already, her love had started talking to her. This was common for him, though, and since the two were very close, Freya instantly knew what he was talking about.

“Yes... The people of this kingdom have been very kind to me. Living here is almost as pleasant as it is living in Burmecia. I daresay that the old village had the edge in terms of friends and memories, but this place is almost as good.”

“So this is where you live...” he murmured. Freya silently affirmed his guess, and began to shed her outer wear. She put on something more comfortable, a snow-white terry cloth robe and some slippers, and offered her love some of her famous tea.

“Oh, you *know* I must have that tea of yours!” exclaimed Fratley. “Darling Freya, your tea was magnificent ten years ago, and I know it has not changed in the least!”

A single sip, and Fratley was convinced.

“Magnificent,” he smiled, then slyly added, “just like you.”

“Dummy,” she grinned before kissing him. Fratley smiled at his love, and noticed the ribbons on her tail. One of them was a lemony-colored sash with a hint of lime to it, given to her by Fratley as a symbol of their love. It was similar to an engagement ring, but sadly, Freya had not been able to “utilize” the sash as it was meant to be used. The other, however, was a rose-red ribbon, lovingly given to her by Beatrix on her last birthday. It was tied very close to Fratley’s, giving off a bit of a fiery sensation.

“My dear, you still have our engagement sash!” he exclaimed. Freya’s silvery fur turned reddish, and she bashfully stared down at the cup of tea she held.

“Well, I mean... it was the last remnant of you I had. I carried it into my most recent battle, and can you believe that through all that I suffered, neither of the two ribbons were slashed apart? It truly is a miracle...” He smiled at her, and kissed her nose daintily.

“We never did get married, did we?”

“Only because you ran out on me with that silly quest of yours.” Fratley made a sour face, knowing she had caught him with that comment.

“Urk...”

“I don’t know what you were thinking!” she exclaimed. “The sheer nerve, running out on me only a few weeks after proposing! Yes, I know I said I would wait for you, but... five years?? And you came back forgetting about the whole thing, stupid dolt! I ought to pour this tea right on your lap!” Poor Fratley was now backed into a corner, looking as pathetic as an injured puppy, and even whimpering a little. Still, he deserved every harsh word Freya had to lash out at him, and more. To leave such a woman for an aimless pursuit was worse than stupid, it was cowardly.

“...I *am* at your mercy, my lady,” he sighed, “and I pray you make it swift. But do you not think that I have suffered enough?”

“And I more so,” she said coldly. “Sir Fratley, do you realize that there was a time in my life where I considered killing myself?”

“.....No...”

“And you were not there to save me,” she said bitterly. “Of course, I thought you were dead... and I was so miserable that I wanted to join you. Fratley,

do you know how very close I came to Death and dishonor? Do you, really?”

A pause.

“...No, I cannot say that I do.”

“I do not understand why you did the things that you did in the past,” she whispered as she stared at him. “But Fratley, I am a forgiving woman, and I *am* merciful, and I am willing to put aside your mistakes, because I do love you, and I wish to bear you no scorn, and because I have already suffered enough. Dear Fratley, I will keep your sash tied to my tail forever, even if your body is destroyed beyond repair, even if Death truly does claim you, even if we are a thousand miles and a thousand years apart.”

A longer pause.

“...I don’t deserve such love.”

“I know,” she smiled as she caressed his face. “Neither do I. Now please, darling, let us all put the past behind us, all right? Let us keep this sash tied to our tails, and to our hearts, and let us not give up our love for each other. I would hate to do something like that, after everything we have been through together.”

“...Freya...” The two warriors embraced, and held each other tightly, and kissed each other and wept. As Fratley held his beloved fiancée, he noticed again the red ribbon around her tail, and asked her about it.

“Oh, Freya, what’s that other sash?” he pointed. Freya looked down at it and nearly jumped out of her fur as she remembered why she was even talking to Fratley in the first place.

“D’gahh! Blast you, Fratley Irontail! You made me forget why I even came here in the first place!!”

“No I didn’t!”

“You...” She growled and pointed a finger at him, but sighed in defeat. “...Forget it. We’re both big morons. Anyway, I came here to ask you if you know anything about Beatrix.” A hint of an old memory struck Fratley’s mind, and he recalled hearing about such a name before.

“Bea... trix? Oh, you mean the famous Alexandrian General? The one I set out to challenge?”

“Yes, that’s her. She went along with me to fight in the war, but she should have returned with the

other soldiers. I haven't seen her since, and I'm beginning to grow worried!"

"Do you know her well?" he asked. She smiled dryly at the extreme understatement.

"She's practically my sister. The two of us are very close—but, ah, not like you and me. I do care for her deeply, so that's why I'm asking."

"So the love of my life and my greatest rival are close friends..." Fratley smiled and mused over the thought for some time. It really was unbelievable, considering the two warriors' personalities..... but then again, he could see it happening. From what he had heard of Beatrix, she might in fact have been able to get along with Freya very well.

"Well, dear, if it's Beatrix we're talking about, then you don't need to worry."

"Why do you say that?" she asked him.

"It's Beatrix!! I mean, I sacrificed my love life with you, the woman of my dreams, just to challenge my skills against her! Didn't she slay a hundred knights single-handedly? Wasn't she a master of the blade, and the Queen's champion, and so on and so forth?"

“Yes, all of that is true, but still...” Fratley smiled at his beloved, and took her face in his hands. He placed a gentle kiss on her forehead, then her nose, then her chin, and finally her mouth, before reassuring her.

“I wouldn’t worry about her. She’s seen as many battles as both of us put together, and I dare admit that it would take the two of us combined to amass the ability to defeat her. And if she is as dear a friend as you claim her to be, then she would have the heart to return one day, albeit a few days late. Darling, relax! Surely there is a reason for her absence! Perhaps... one of the boats got held up.”

“No, everything’s been accounted for,” replied Freya. “Except for Amarant’s team, everyone’s back. It’s just that.....” She trailed off, shivering slightly as her worried piled on more and more. A blank, empty, haunting look was in her eyes, and though Fratley held onto her tight, the fear still did not leave.

But, Freya tried to remain hopeful according to Fratley’s advice. She weathered through the remainder of the celebration with reasonable gusto, and even allowed herself to have a good time. Eventually, things calmed down and Alexandria

became quiet again—or as quiet as a kingdom like that ever got. With the antics of the Vivi army, Quina’s culinary quirks, Zidane’s loveable wackiness, the Tantalus crew running around, and Lani actually being knighted when she returned (which was the mother of all shocks), things never seemed to grow dull or serene.

But by this time, when the parades ended and the kingdom became theoretically still again, a month had passed since the last Alexandrian soldier came back to the kingdom. By that time, Amarant and the Hunter had parted ways with the kingdom, and the golden-haired girl who had led everyone to prepare for Iudicium had vanished as well (though many people believed that she journeyed towards Burmecia to help rebuild it). The King and Queen had established order, Steiner was finally given a higher rank (though he was still not a General, poor guy), and things began to look like normal again, or whatever passed as normal in Gaia and Alexandria.

Freya whiled away the month in waiting, or else by spending her time with Fratley. Every second she used in the company of her beloved was just as precious as he was, and the two began to seriously consider a marriage date at long last. But even then, Freya insisted on waiting, for she desperately

wanted Beatrix to be the maid of honor. Fratley did not mind, and was content to merely catch up on lost years. It was both a time of peace and of sorrow, a time of love and dreadful anticipation, a time of happiness and horror.

And despite everyone's assurances, as the days passed and the nights revealed nothing, Freya began to become sick with worry. Her most beloved friend had yet to return from the wastes of the cold northern regions, and though she had lots of hope, and she didn't dare consider Beatrix dead, Freya couldn't help but fear the worst for her fellow warrior. And so, reenacting a previous bout of depression, Freya sat in the clinic of Alexandria castle, with nobody in the room except for herself, and sat perfectly still as she stared outside the window, letting the golden rays of the sun shine on her as she watched, and waited, and worried.

Beatrix... where are you...?

To be continued...

11. Problems

Part Eleven: Problems

There was no denying it: Freya had the blues.

Maybe it was the location, or the atmosphere. The dragoon was stuck by herself on a stool in the Alexandrian tavern, where Zidane had once drowned his sorrows a few years back after Garnet was crowned Queen. The place was just as smoky, depressing, and groggy as ever. It made Freya feel like doing nothing else except shutting her eyes, resting her head on the counter, and groaning away the rest of her life with a headache and a world of troubles. There was a bit of misery in her lazy grasp, as she tipped the shot of wine down her throat, and the slow, soulful music being played off in the corner didn't help things at all.

Maybe it was the fact that she felt like she had just lost a friend so close to her that she considered her a sister. Freya's original family had died before she turned five years old, including most of her then-siblings. She had been taken in by a loving aunt and uncle, and had a few cousins to play around with, but she had never felt the connection with another

person so powerfully as she felt with Beatrix. Freya honestly considered the woman part of her family by now, and although she knew in her heart that Beatrix could take care of herself, she still couldn't help but worry.

The woman had been missing for almost a month now. Three hectic weeks had gone by, with celebration and recovery and mourning and the gathering of heroes and loved ones. But one loved one was still unaccounted for, even though by that time, every other soldier had returned home, even a few that had been thought dead. So of course, Freya had good reason to worry about her friend. Beatrix was her elder, and just a bit more skilled than she (Freya had no problems admitting that), but she was still human—and she could still be chased by the Reaper.

“Hey,” said a voice. Freya looked up from her half-empty glass of wine and saw the keeper staring at her. “You don’t look so well. Are you gonna be okay?”

“...No,” she said softly, “not really. But I sure will try...”

The time—Three weeks after the end of the campaign against Iudicium.

The place—A smoky bar stuck in the middle of Alexandria City.

The players—Freya Crescent, close friend of Beatrix, who is still missing.

The status—Concern

Adelbert Steiner decided to take a well-earned rest from his duties, not that there really was that much to do anymore. Once the kingdom settled down into a badly-needed era of peace... again... the armored knight suddenly found himself with lots of free time on his hands. Steiner had adjusted himself to enjoy these peaceful times, unlike some other soldiers who would become jittery with nothing to do. The absence of war would not kill him, nor even slow him down—no, it would take the absence of Gysahl pickles and piece’a to do that.

Seriously, though, Steiner wanted to enjoy the day. He did not need to be forced away from his duties; he was more than happy to shirk them for awhile. Even the most dedicated knight or servant needed a break, and this one was slightly overdue. Besides, in such a peaceful time as this, who would want to attack the castle? Thus far, all the enemies of Alexandria had been accounted for, and with the

kingdom prospering again, more and more allies were joining forces with her.

Without his duties, Steiner seemed a happier and more tolerant person, but he needed to lose his armor in order to improve his physical appearance. It had begun to rust over again from so much use, and that now-famous squeaking sound it made whenever he walked in it had returned, though not quite to its full noisy glory just yet. He could still stand out in a crowd, but at least people began respecting him and his Pluto Knights. With the air of the kingdom in his nostrils for but a few minutes, he *clank-clank-clanked* his way to the tavern, and stepped in for a drink.

“Ah, a fine day it is out there!” he exclaimed. There was not much of a populace to greet him in return, so he merely walked up to the counter and sat next to Freya.

“Steiner,” she addressed with a nod. “You seem to be in a reasonably good mood.”

“I have good reason for it!” he exclaimed before ordering his drink. “I for one am a supporter of peace! I enjoy this time of rest and rebuilding, but what man—or woman—could not? We have just endured the bleakest winter of chaos and despair that

any kingdom could boast, and though the storms were tough and the weather was unforgiving, we all persevered. And now spring is here, to delight us with its warmth and spread new life over the land!”

“It’s bloody cold outside,” she snorted. “In case you haven’t noticed, it’s almost wintertime out here.”

“It’s a *symbolic* springtime,” he stated. “I know that winter approaches us. I was speaking figuratively. Can I not have such deep thoughts every once in awhile? Come, come now, Freya, I am not as big of an ox as most people say!...At least... not *all* the time...” She mumbled, and slowly swung her head around in a drunken daze.

“Sorry. I’m just worried, that’s all.”

“About Lady Beatrix?” She nodded her head. “Hm, yes, I see. You two have been drawing very close over the past year or two. It does indeed wonder me that the two of you were once bitter enemies. And now you can barely stand to be apart from each other! Why, if I was as lecherous as His Highness used to be, I would consider you two..... Well, I shan’t insult you with my thoughts.” Freya silently stared at him, trying to put a smile on her face but failing in every way. She sighed, and

finished her wine just as Steiner received his own cup.

“I do love her,” she said quietly, “I’ll admit that. The woman’s like my sister. I would lose my hair if I found out something awful had happened to her, and considering me, I have a lot of hair to lose.”

“Indeed,” he muttered with a cough. He turned his head, smiled, and patted her shoulder gently. “My good lady... do you not think that I worry about her as well? At the very least, the Lady Beatrix and I are good comrades-in-arms, though I sourly admit we did not always see eye-to-eye in the past. Over the years, I too have learned to cherish her and to respect her, and to see her as part of my own life. At first, I felt apathetic towards her, but once I got to know her, I became as a sort of mentor to her.

“And then came the time where her skills began exceeding my own,” he said with some difficulty. “I was driven quite envious of her during that period, though now that I think of it, *she* might have been envious of *me*. Either way, we both worked fanatically to become better than each other, and I suppose she had the upper hand, being a woman in a society mostly run by women. Now that I think

about it, though, that woman brought out the best in me. I would not have worked so hard if I had not been envious of her skills!

“Now, as of these recent times, I shall indeed admit that the rivalry has died down, and in its place, a great friendship has taken place instead. I will admit that I care for Lady Beatrix quite a bit—I mean, I would not have convinced her to stay if I hadn’t—and even now, at times, I find myself regretting that I cannot further my relationship with her. Now, though, during this time of peace, we may have something yet.

“...I can see that the only thing I’m doing is rambling on and boring you to tears,” he noted. “I’m sorry. Perhaps it’s the wine, or the fine cool air outside. Maybe I just open up more in times of peace, or maybe I just never had the chance to really talk to somebody before. These taverns can do that sort of thing.”

“Agreed,” she said.

“In any case, I wouldn’t worry about her,” he said, rubbing his glass gently before downing the liquid within. “Mmn, that’s good stuff. But truly, Lady Freya, you would be much happier trusting her. If Lady Beatrix has any love of you and this

kingdom, death and distance shall not keep her from reaching here, even if she must do so as a ghost. Frankly, though, I wouldn't be surprised if she came here right today!"

"You really think she would?"

"I don't know," he admitted smugly. "I'm afraid I don't know her as well as you. I envy that close friendship you two have. But anyway, you shouldn't worry. Go spend time with the man who loves you, and your friends who care for you, and you'll find that the time flies fast, and the tiny hole in your heart will be patched up before long." He smiled at her, and with his great speech finished, Steiner focused on his drink again, and finished it. Freya could only shake her head, completely amazed at the iron man's surprising wisdom. Feeling a bit better about the situation, she leaned in and gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

"You're a good man, Steiner," she smiled. "Beatrix deserves to have somebody like you. When she returns, and I know she will, you should tell her what you told me. She'd be very pleased to hear it." With that, she smiled again and removed herself from the bar, leaving Steiner slightly petrified. He

rubbed the place where Freya had kissed him, and chuckled lightly to himself.

“Hahaha... you old dog... Heaven help us all if I suddenly turn into a lady’s man...”

Watching Quina give chase to a frog was an entertaining thing to see for the first three minutes. Every once in awhile, things got interesting and the Qu would dive down and snatch the amphibian, but most of the time, s/he would miss or else start lagging behind. Quina was on a mission to catch twelve frogs for a stew s/he was brewing, and with the progress s/he was making, it would only take it about... two more hours.

S/he had an audience of two guards to watch the pursuit, but once the novelty of the situation wore off, they grew bored and restless, and badly desired something better to do. They were both in the middle of their shift, which would probably run on until Quina caught the desired frogs, so they had quite a way to go before they were relieved. Like catching frogs, standing guard was a pursuit that was great for the first half hour or so, but once time began to really drag on, and once it appeared as if nothing would happen for the rest of the day, weariness and restlessness took over.

Ahead of the guards was the landscape of Alexandria, and the territory it claimed, all the way up to the sea. There was not much out there, aside from the grass and the rivers and the distant smoky mountains—at least, nothing in terms of a threat. Even though the kingdom had just went through a great war, and peace was reigning once again, the duty of a guard still remained—*still* remained, no matter what the circumstances.

At least their pay wasn't bad.

Both guards each let out a long, weary sigh in unison, and prepared themselves for a mind-numbing two hours of watching the grass grow. Obviously, there wasn't going to be anything approaching Alexandria with evil intent—not today, not for a long while. Perhaps only the promise of a good salary kept the guards standing there, in the chilly late autumn air, with extra armor to guard against the cold and spears in their hands.

But then, to their slight relief, something appeared in the far distance. For the time being, the guards didn't care whether the image was a hallucination or was real, or whether it was friendly or antagonistic, or even if it was just a passing bunny or monster. Anything, any diversion at all,

kept their interest going, and as the image drew slowly closer to their location, they prepared themselves for whatever it was.

As the image drew closer still, the patrolwomen dropped their guard, opened their mouths in surprise, and rubbed their bleary eyes, disbelieving what they saw. Yet as the figure walked closer to the castle gate, there was less and less doubt that this thing was what they thought it was. The guards were driven completely speechless, and with no other response, they chose to merely smile, and reveal a few tears as they saw the familiar face. They both prepared to salute...

“BEATRIX!!!!”

SLAM!!!

With a mighty crash, Quina suddenly tackled the poor figure, squeezing it violently as s/he bounced up and down. The person gagged in surprise and pain, the fair face she had turning very blue very fast.

“Beatrix, Beatrix, Beatrix! I so glad you safe!” cried Quina as s/he hugged the person even tighter. “I so, so, SO glad you safe! I miss you! I miss you! So glad you safe!”

“QUINA!” choked the poor person. “You’re... choking me! I... CAN’T... BREEEEEEEEATHE!!!” Quina grumbled out quizzically, and released poor Beatrix from its grasp. With a mighty gasp, she inhaled as much air as she possibly could, restoring the lungs that had received such a brutal hug from the overzealous Qu. The guards, both of them, stared at their General in dumbstruck awe as they tried to make sense of things.

“...Uhh...”

“What’s going on here?” came another voice from behind. It belonged to Freya, who had been taking a quiet walk by herself to clear her mind. She had just happened to pass by, overhearing Quina squeal out something, and had decided to investigate. When she came upon the scene, however, she suddenly froze. For the first time in over three weeks, Freya Crescent laid her eyes upon her dearest friend.

Eyes of emerald met two naked eyes of soft crimson, and a gentle smile, gaping open slightly from joy and happiness and relief, curled its way upon the mouth of the dragoon as she beheld the woman who had been missing for so long. Beatrix returned the smile with unbound amounts of love

and warmth, and the two women rushed towards each other and flung their arms around the other's body, holding onto the other so they would never be apart, ever again. Freya shuddered happily as she embraced her long-lost friend, too amazed to do anything else.

"...I thought I lost you, girl!" she whispered. Beatrix smiled, and nodded her head as she rested her chin on Freya's shoulder.

"I... thought you lost me too, friend..." The two childhood friends held each other for a few seconds longer, until Freya broke the embrace. She stood back slightly, touching her friend's bare arms and looking deep into her face, making sure that this was not an image.

"...Well..." she said at last, "well-done, my friend. Well done. Good to see you again." Beatrix grinned, knowing that Freya was holding back on her emotions, and leaned in to give the woman a shorter and less desperate hug. She playfully kissed the girl's forehead, wherein she received a sharp squeal of protest and a quick, but harmless, slap on the shoulders.

"Ack, hey!" Beatrix giggled, completely apathetic towards her unusual actions, and ruffled

her friend's hair lovingly. Freya let out a sigh, and returned the action gently. "I did miss you," she whispered softly. Beatrix smiled, and gave the dragoon a wink.

"Likewise."

"Whoa, hey, look everybody!!" A sudden eruption of noise interrupted the ladies' reunion: it had been Zidane, and the poor fool nearly fell over as he caught sight of Beatrix. He shouted out to everyone within listening range (considering him, that would have reached Dali), and soon, probably half the kingdom came streaming over to see what the fuss was about. In the midst of the crowd was Garnet, still carrying herself as a regal woman despite the loss of her arm, but the regality faded when she caught sight of Beatrix.

With a squeal, both Garnet and Zidane rushed over, and threw their arms around the General. Beatrix welcomed them both, and a massive group hug held the three (no, four—Freya joined in a bit later) of them together. Smiling so much that she began to cry, Garnet rubbed her nose against the General's neck, tickling her just slightly as she welcomed her dear friend.

“It’s good to see you again, Beatrix,” she said.
“Welcome home.”

The smell of good food being cooked stirred into Freya’s nose, and she woke up sniffing the delicious odor, alongside her love Fratley, who seemed just as engrossed with the smell as she was. It seemed to be delicious, warm, soft, buttery pancakes, reeking of syrup on the side and just barely touched with peppermint leaves. If Freya had not been fully awake, she would have been drooling that very moment.

“...Mmmm, what’s that delicious smell?” she asked of Fratley. He smiled and daintily kissed her nose.

“Beatrix decided to make both of us breakfast in bed. She woke up at almost the same time I did, and wanted to do something nice for us.” Freya smiled, and let out a soft moan as she rested her head on his arm.

“I see. You know, it should be us who are treating her to something nice.”

“Well, she wanted to,” he replied as he smiled and took her hand. She grinned back at him sweetly, and moved in for a long, slow kiss—which was cut just a few seconds too short by the arrival of Beatrix. She had not her usual clothes on, and in fact looked much better and more normal in civilian wear, which now consisted of a light violet sweater, and wool leggings of a plum color, and a cute ponytail for her hair. In her hands was the tray that kept the breakfast supported, and a tiny puff of steam told tales that she had just gotten through with making it. Beatrix didn’t stammer or blush when she intruded upon the current scene, for she considered herself close enough to Freya to endure those “intimate moments”, and she wanted to be friends with Fratley as well.

“Sorry for interrupting,” she said calmly as she placed the tray on a lamp stand nearby. “I know Freya likes pancakes made this way, but what about you, Fratley?”

“If they were made from the heart, then I shall enjoy every bite,” he proclaimed. Beatrix smiled and stole just a little piece for herself—Freya thought she deserved so much more—and made a small show of complimenting her own cooking as she sat down with her friends.

“Do you like it?” she asked once they stuffed a few pieces in their mouths. Their response was quite positive; to be frank, though, neither one of them knew that she could cook.

“I never knew you could cook, Bea,” said Freya. “Where’d you learn?”

“Quina,” she responded. Freya silently nodded her head, having been explained the situation with just one word, and finished her breakfast. Ever since Beatrix returned, which had been a glorious addition to the previous day’s peaceful events, she had been a changed woman. This breakfast in bed was just one example of how much she had shifted: not too long ago, she had openly declared her love for Freya—sisterly love, of course, as she considered the dragoon an irreplaceable part of her “family” (then again, Freya had beaten her to the punch, but still...). Sadly, Steiner knew nothing of the woman’s feelings... but Freya and Fratley made sure that that error would change, and quickly.

The one thing that nagged at Freya the most was why Beatrix had been absent for so long. She had contemplated every possibility that came to mind, preposterous or otherwise, and couldn’t come up with anything that explained such a thing away. She

had intended to ask once things began to calm down, but since Beatrix's arrival, things had been anything but. Of course, now that things were peaceful, and she was thinking about it all over again, she decided to ask and be told once and for all.

"Beatrix, darling," she said later that morning, "there's something that's been on my mind for a long time."

"What's that?"

"Well, I've been wondering—ever since you got back, I've always wanted to know why it took you so bloody long to get here. The team that went to Esto Gaza came back weeks ago, and even the last registered soldier came back about four days ago. So what took *you* so long?" Beatrix smiled coyly, knowing that somewhere along the line, somebody would ask that same question. She did intend to reveal her story, but words really did not express the full scale of her experience.

"I was wondering when you'd ask me that. Here, come with me. I really can't tell you in words, so I might as well show you. Bring Fratley, too: we might need a third person."

“Third person? For what?” Beatrix smiled at her friend, a mischievous glint in her gentle ruby eyes.

“You’ll see.”

Beatrix guided the dragoons outside, into the late morning air which was nice and cool, but not quite chilly yet, though winter was advancing slowly (hence her change into warmer clothes). Freya and Fratley, being mostly covered by fur, were unaffected by the chill and kept their normal clothes. The streets of mid-autumn Alexandria were particularly quiet, with hardly anyone around to shuffle the streets, except a vendor selling seasonal merchandise. Freya was hungry for information; Fratley, as he saw Beatrix pacing around and wondering how she could “pull this off”, was more or less bemused.

“...What are you trying to do?” asked Freya after a moment’s observation. Beatrix cupped her chin in her palm, thought hard, and beckoned Freya over.

“I’m going to show you what happened, movement for movement. Think of this as a play that Tantalus would put on, except none of us are as good as any of them.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” muttered Freya coyly. Beatrix understood her friend’s less-than-stellar reference, and returned the coyness before resuming.

“Anyway, this is going to be like a production of what happened. Naturally, I shall play the part of myself. One of you must be Vikar Iudicium—here, let’s draw straws since I know neither of you would volunteer.” Although both Burmecians didn’t mind acting a little bit, they both drew straws anyway, and Fratley was given the part. Beatrix then loaned him a blunt stick she had picked up off the ground, and began instructing Fratley what to do. Freya tried hard not to burst out laughing as her loved ones reenacted the dreadful scene, but it was extremely difficult to keep a straight face, considering neither one could act at all.

“First of all,” said Beatrix, “Iudicium and I were fighting, and very hard at that. Here, come at me, Fratley, but nothing serious. I don’t know how to stage-fight.” Fratley agreed, and the two began to mock-battle in the most pathetic way. Freya let a few chuckles out as she watched the scene.

“You will die, Alexandrian vermin—I swear it!” called Fratley. Beatrix smugly nodded her head.

“Not bad, but I don’t think he said anything like that.”

“I wasn’t acting,” replied the dragoon with a grin. Beatrix rolled her eyes and lamely parried his attacks.

“Ha, ha. I know when I’ve been teased, sir Fratley. Now come on, get serious.”

“But I *am* serious! I’ve been wanting to challenge myself against your skills ever since... oh, I can’t even remember how long it’s been!”

“Since you were seventeen, I think,” offered Freya. Fratley nodded his head and thanked his beloved.

“Right, right.”

“On with the next scene,” coughed Beatrix impatiently. Fratley smiled and apologized, and paused to see what she would say next. “Iudicium was beating me, believe it or not. He had smacked my sword away—go ahead, Fratley, that’s your cue.” Fratley nodded his head, and just to irritate the woman, he gently tapped his stick up against hers. She growled in exasperation, and lamely let the object drop.

“I have you now,” he purred with delight. Beatrix quickly yanked the stick from his grasp, and snapped it in two over her knee. “Hey! That’s my sword!”

“I broke it in the battle!” she spat. “Anyway, we were both beaten and bloody. I was on the ground...” She paused just long enough to lie down on the cobbled street, and then added, “And Iudicium was hovering over me, grasping what was left of his sword.”

“...Huh? Oh...” Fratley quickly scurried over to one of the pieces of the stick he had been wielding, and picked up one so he would “stay in character”. “Like this?”

“More or less. Anyway, I was weak—I mean, completely unable to move. *Completely*. I had drained all my energy, and this guy still had the strength to stand.”

“My dear!” whispered Freya in amazement. “That does sound rather perilous. How did you escape? Or are you a ghost?”

“Ghosts don’t eat pancakes,” she noted. “But anyway, you wouldn’t believe me if I told you. See, Iudicium had raised his sword in the air, like he was

going to sacrifice me to some pagan god... Uh, that's your cue." Fratley nodded his head and raised the stick in the air, and pretended to jab at Beatrix.

"Die, woman!"

"Cut the theatrics," moaned Freya. "But seriously, what did you do?"

"I rolled to the side," explained Beatrix in a matter-of-fact voice, and to demonstrate, she did just that. "What else could I do?"

"But you said—"

"I knew you wouldn't believe me," replied a slightly-dizzy warrior. "I don't know where, but it seemed as if I found a secret cistern of strength somewhere within me. I... I actually think I saw the spirit of my dead mother and father in that brief moment. I saw them smiling at me, like they were welcoming me into their arms. But when I thought all was lost, they whispered something to me..."

"*'Live, my child. Live, and grow, and we will see you another day.'* Call it a miracle if you will, but this was all the encouragement I needed." Freya smiled warmly at her friend, and Fratley had to admit that the General did indeed have a few slick tricks up her sleeves.

“So while you rolled away, Iudicium got his sword stuck in the ground, from all the force he put behind that final blow, right?”

“That is *exactly* what happened!” pointed Beatrix, and Fratley performed as thus. “He couldn’t pull it out—at least, not at first. I didn’t allow him the time he needed to yank it out, so with one last great effort, I summoned up my last bit of strength, grabbed my sword—which thankfully had been thrown quite close to where I ended up. Anyway, I grabbed my sword, and cleaved the man’s head off with a final blow!” Fiercely, she performed exactly as she said: Beatrix grabbed a nearby stick, stood up, and slapped Fratley’s neck with it. He grunted out in pain, and plummeted to the ground.

Freya laughed out loud, and applauded the story.

“That was wonderful!” she exclaimed. “Well, maybe for us it is. I know I’d have fared no better if I had drawn that short straw. So, you really killed him, eh?”

“I saw his head roll and everything,” stated Beatrix. “It was horrid... but it had to be done. The very future of Alexandria rested in my hands. It *had* to be done...”

“I see...” Pausing thoughtfully, Freya considered what her friend had said, and marveled over the performance. Meanwhile, Fratley stood up and dusted himself off, breathing out a few sighs of relief.

“So now I am dead,” he said. “But that still does not explain your absence. Your recovery from such a fight, no matter how hard it was for you, couldn’t have taken more than a few days.”

“Well...” The holy knight trailed off, absently wiping away a part of her hair that had fallen in her eye, like she used to do in the past. “My physical wounds were not too terribly grievous. I ended up being rescued by the people of Iudicium Manor, who were kind enough to keep me warm and healthy. They told me that my actions had liberated them, and now that they had no master, they were free to do as they pleased. My recovery was just their way of repaying the debt.”

“Even so...”

“I had more wounds than physical,” muttered Beatrix quietly as she stared at the floor. “I had to... for lack of a better term... sacrifice a part of my life to win that fight. To recover from physical injuries is one thing, but to recover from biological injuries...

Well, now I think you know why it took me so long to get here. Besides, even after I got better, I was unable to go anywhere until another boat passed by Esto Gaza. I was stuck on that freezing island until then, so I guess you can understand my absence. Forgive me, but it was out of my control...”

Freya, who was like a sponge absorbing the watery story that Beatrix had to offer, stood in the cool streets in awe. Not only did she now have a new respect for her friend, and not only did she now understand the circumstances which brought them together again, she was just plain happy to see this woman acting so... *naturally*. It couldn't be explained, really—it was a kind of feeling, something like pride and love and excitement mixed in together, with something silly sprinkled in, until it cooked enough to bubble up, only to be cooled off later. It was positive, whatever it was, and Freya exuded as much of it as she could towards her friend.

“Well, whatever the circumstances, I'm glad you're safe,” she said with a smile. Beatrix returned it, and thanked Fratley for performing with her. The mousy man gave her a sly wink, and tipped his hat like a country gentleman.

“A pleasure, milady, a pleasure. And since you spin such a great yarn, I feel it necessary to repay your story with some reward. Ladies, would you permit me to buy the two of you a lunch?”

“I would,” smiled Freya. Beatrix almost spoke up in agreement, but was interrupted by a familiar booming voice.

“I would not!” it cried. The lady turned around just in time to see Steiner coming her way, dressed without his armor but with his autumnal gear. He smiled at the three of them, and gave them his obligatory salute. ‘Fratley, my friend,’ he addressed, “worry not about treating this lady to a lunch. Her bill is on *me*.”

“Steiner...!” Smiling, Beatrix eagerly accepted the offer; Freya merely rolled her eyes.

“Ah, well. We might as well turn this into a date. Should I go see if Zidane and Garnet would like to join us?”

“Would you?” said Fratley. Freya smiled, and kissed his cheek before leaving. Meanwhile, Steiner sighed, tipped an imaginary hat, and gave Beatrix a nod.

“My lady... my friend... my dear Beatrix... I... have something I need to say to you, and I shall address it during the course of our lunch.”

“I think we can compromise,” she replied warmly. “I, too, have something that I have been meaning to say to you, for a very long time.....”

And while the group of friends dined, many things were said, many things were planned, and many things were done, all for the good of everyone else, and all for the good of the things that had already transpired, and would transpire in the future. It seemed, then, that this story was going to have a happy ending after all.

Days, weeks passed. Autumn bloomed from a gentle spark started in the lazy end days of summer, where adults warned their children to wear jackets with their light clothing, and burst into the grand flair of an explosion of color. The flames fell gently down from atop their high perches of beech and maple and poplar and oak, and burned to the ground where they littered the streets with bright colors. Orange, red, and gold swept the land in the autumnal days, but this fire died down as the complete chill of

the late year grasped its burning throat. The colors died, and became brown and gray and black, and choked and died, and the degrees fell to an uncertain low temperature, and more and more clothing had to be worn to keep the fair residents from chilling.

Winter came, slowly at first, but progressed rapidly after the first serious fall of snow. Up until those days, the skies had not been clouded much, nor the air very full of flakes, except in passing mention from time to time: “Oh look, there is a trace of snow in the air”, but that was all, really. Not now. A blanket of frost—a freezing blanket—covered the land like it had been a gigantic bed, and this cold wrapping left the world to do little else except shrug, and cease the struggle for warmth, and proceed directly to bed. A blanket, and time for the world to sleep! Such symbolism stirred more than one poet and muse to write and sing and lament about the situation, and of warmer temperatures.

The year was closing fast, another would approach to replace it. The living creatures of the land—that is, the ones without sentience—they all went into their own version of sleep, and blanketed themselves up in caves and burrows, and hid and rested and waited for spring to emerge, and for things to look green once again. Those who had the

power of reason and creativity used this time of sleep and “inactivity” to the best of their knowledge, and though fewer and fewer people would be traveling or even stepping out of their houses, it was never a better time for people to gather together, and consider themselves closer. For, in this period of “death”, life could truly flourish amongst the residents, particularly that of Alexandria.

During this passage of time, there were many developments that went about the kingdom. Birthdays were had, holidays were observed, and one particular event outshined them all. At last—it seemed to have been delayed forever, really—at long last, the wedding of Mr. Fratley Irontail and Miss Freya Crescent finally took place, after experiencing years of procrastination. It was official now, with the vows and the visits and the kisses, and though it was obviously nowhere near as extravagant as the marriage of Zidane and Garnet, some felt it was just as touching.

During the wedding, more than one direct reference to Beatrix’s own status was made, most of them ending up embarrassing her. The King and Queen were gentle to her about it, mentioning it only here and there (even the zesty Zidane did not divulge upon such an interesting topic for long), and

other friends that Beatrix had made muttered it three or four times, but Freya and Fratley beat them all out.

“You were the one who caught the bouquet, my friend,” pointed Mrs. Irontail slyly. “I didn’t ask you to catch it. You know, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say you *wanted* that thing!”

“That’s nonsense!” replied Beatrix defensively. “It just... fell into my arms! What do you expect; I was carrying all those gifts! It was just a coincidence, Freya! Nothing more!”

“Even so...” replied her friend. “Trixie-dear, you should really consider settling down. I think it’s high time you and Steiner began to seriously strengthen your relationship!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” stated Beatrix stubbornly. Freya grinned at the denial, and though Beatrix left to attend to other matters, she was pestered almost all day by the newlyweds. Surprisingly, Fratley bugged her even more than Freya. He had seen the unusual but touching chemistry that had went on between Beatrix and Steiner, and no matter how much of a gentleman he was, he couldn’t help but press the issue. Beatrix ended up groaning in irritation and asking Garnet, or

Lani, or *somebody* to keep “those rats” occupied while she attended to other affairs.

All of that had happened in the cusp of late autumn, or perhaps very early winter—it was somewhere in between the two. Freya and Fratley had been married for a little while now, and they grew in love every day, and there was already an embarrassing conspiracy going round that if Beatrix ever actually got married, her children and Freya’s children would probably end up together with each other.

“How do you have the nerve of mentioning something like that to me!” shrieked Beatrix whenever such rumors reached her. “For the sake of the Creator! Freya’s not having children anytime soon, and don’t even get me *started* about my own situation! For shame! Don’t people have better things to gossip about? Perhaps their highnesses will bear offspring sometime soon! Talk about that!!”

Poor Beatrix.

Revelry is magnified during the winter season, perhaps because a certain jolly old elf was involved with the holiday, but even the happiest of moments do not last for always. Things began to settle down a month after the wedding, when the snows began to

grow steady and serious, and fires burned harder, and old people told wilder stories to the youngest generation, and traces of sweetness could be found under mistletoe and inside wrapped boxes and stockings. The Lady Beatrix was straying from the castle quarters more and more, and more and more, and more and more still, til' there came a time when her presence there might have surprised somebody.

She had the right to do as she pleased. No matter how high a rank she owned, or who she commanded, or what weapon she possessed, or who loved her, the lady was still but a human. She deserved to spend time away from duty, with friends. She needed to rest in a soft bed, with warm fires, away from snoring soldiers and dirty jokes and endless gossip. She found herself sleeping over at Freya's house more and more, though there were occasions when her nights would end up being... "restless".

"Morons," she muttered once in awhile. "Morons... Can't they keep it down in there?"

Time was her cruelest enemy, and after that, restlessness, and after that, inoccupation. Beatrix began to question herself during this time, and honestly began to think of what her future would be

like. She seriously began to wish for a family of her own, or an identity of her own, and even a place where she could call Home, without the addition of soldiers and swords and sovereigns. In war she was a General, ready to swing the sword for her Majesties, but in peace she was a citizen, ready to wait and wonder and wither away. What purpose did a sharp sword have in a sleepy world?

She needed to talk to somebody. She wanted to do something. Middle of the night—her dearest friends would most likely be sleeping in each other's arms. No matter how close she was to Freya and Garnet, or Zidane and Fratley, she knew she could not interrupt such intimacy. They had “somebody” to be with, somebody that completed their puzzles. In the words of a piece of scripture she loved, they were all but one-winged angels, unable to fly on their own, but filled in perfectly with the wing of another.

“Angels of a feather flock together”...eh?

She needed to walk. Putting on the heaviest robe and slippers she knew of, Beatrix quietly crept out of Freya's home, and went outside to wander the dark wintry streets of Alexandria. The snow had truly covered the world up into a sheet of wooly white.

There was scarcely a spot left that the snow had not touched, not even on the roofs of the houses. A few lamps here and there lit the way, and the snow was not falling so hard as to blind Beatrix as she trudged through the banks. It was late, but not so late that the tavern would be closed.

Inside, the warmth of the fire cooked her freezing body back up to a delicious feeling, and she sighed and smiled and shivered with relief. The tender held back a yawn as he waved at her, and told her that, just for her, he would keep the place open another hour. Beatrix thanked him, and some warm tea was given to her, the perfect kind to make one fall asleep.

“Hello, Adelbert,” she said in greetings. The man seated not too far away from her smiled and waved back.

“Hello, Beatrix. Can you not sleep?”

“.....I... just needed some extra time to think,” she replied. Steiner smiled, and situated himself at the stool next to hers. Beatrix, now slightly more comfortable with expressing herself towards the man, placed her head on his shoulder and let her thoughts tumble out.

“I need to vent,” she sighed. “Can you spare an hour or two?”

“I will remain for as long as you need me,” he replied. She gave him a sweet smile, and asked the tender to give them privacy. It was then that the floodgates were opened, and the soul of the woman poured out like water.

“I’m looking for something, something that will fulfill me and make me feel like I truly have a place. When I started the knighthood, I was merely trying to look for a place to belong, as I once belonged in D’negel and the circus. Haha... I ended up being General and champion of the Queen. Hahaha! Can you believe that a place of mere convenience has turned into such a large part of my life?”

“...I never thought of it that way,” he admitted.

“Now, I’m starting to question things again,” she continued. “All those wars are ended, the enemies are gone, and we’re all living ‘happily ever after’. Here is where most of the stories would end, with the heroes winning and finding happiness. But life goes on, Adelbert. It finds a way to move onward even after the happy ending. In fact, no matter how many happy endings we find, there’ll always be more to find, and another day to live through.”

She was rambling now, but he let her ramble. Whenever her temper wasn't bubbling, Beatrix had a very beautiful voice.

"Freya and Fratley have been given their happy ending," she sighed. "They are together now, married at last. I'm happy for them, of course, but... it goes on. Life goes on, whether after a storm or after a celebration, life goes on. It's not 'The End', it just goes on. They'll have kids, and those kids will have kids, and so many cycles will go on, but... it won't ever end. There's always going to be something."

Still rambling. She wasn't going anywhere. But he let her talk.

"...I've been thinking a lot recently," she sighed. "You know, Steiner—Adelbert—I feel like... I don't belong here. It's the strangest feeling, but... it's like... I don't know. I've lived in this kingdom for half my life, but you know something? I don't think I've ever had the chance to really discover who I am. Am I merely General Beatrix, champion of the Queen and protector of the throne? Am I merely a great soldier and commander? Am I merely a tool used only during war? Do I have other purposes?"

“I believe that humans—no, all living creatures are not set to just one purpose. I believe that people aren’t set to just a single destiny. Sometimes, they *can* walk down more than one path, and discover what else awaits them. If I complete my task in life at 29 years, what else will await me for the remaining fifty? Would the Creator take me away once my single role in life is complete? I don’t think so. I think we, as living intelligent beings, are given multiple destinies in life, and so far, mine has been to sacrifice my own wants and needs for the throne.

“Lately, I have been wondering if there is anything else out there for me. I have done so much for this kingdom, I really should consider an indefinite retirement. Don’t you think so?” She paused and looked at him, searching for some kind of indication that he had listened, or had an opinion of his own. Steiner rubbed his chin and returned her gaze quietly.

“My friend... the last time you considered leaving here, I was able to stop you by way of my words. I said something along the lines of ‘I wish to never leave your side again’, or whatnot. It’s been years since then. In any case, your additional presence here has made me quite happy—quite happy indeed. I have grown to considerably care for

you a great deal, perhaps even.....” Poor guy trailed off, too embarrassed to continue what he was saying.

“.....We might as well say it,” whispered Beatrix. “There’s no denying it. There’s definitely something between us. You may not believe it, but I can feel it. You may not think you are worthy of my attention, but... it does not take much to get my interest. You certainly are more worthy than you accredit yourself to. So, go ahead and say it.” Steiner blushed just a little, and shook his head in agreement.

“...I have grown very fond of you in the past few years,” he muttered. “I daresay that... I...”

“Just let it out,” she said gently as she placed her hand upon his. “It doesn’t matter if it makes sense or not. Just say whatever is on your heart and mind.” He nodded and smiled at her.

“...My love for you is inexhaustible and inextinguishable,” he managed. “You have brought out the very best in me, Beatrix, as I have brought out the best in you. You have opened these stubborn eyes to the truth, and I have melted that stony heart of yours into a greater compassion. You have made me see such a brilliant light, and I have encouraged

you in your hour of darkest needs. Hahaha... my skill has forced you to work harder, and your determination has forced me to work as well! Bah, merciful heavens! I scoff with delight at how compatible we are!!” He chuckled, perhaps a bit too loudly, but she let him laugh.

Beatrix sighed, and had to agree with most everything he had said. There was so much going on in her mind during that period that she needed the assurance of somebody else—the assurance that she was cared for, and loved, and that her life truly mattered, and more than one person would be miserable otherwise. She was, in effect, another one of those many one-winged angels that could only fly with the support of another—yet others flew thanks to her.

“...I love you too, Bert,” she said with a soft smile. She chuckled once, and gave him a playful nudge that would have been a flirt if the hour wasn’t so late. “But anyway,” she resumed, “I have been thinking about lots of things. Do I have a place in this world? Do I have more than one purpose? Am I restricted to this kingdom? Have I ever truly been given ‘freedom’? Have I ever gotten the chance to be my own person? Just... things like that.”

“Alexandria is my home,” said Steiner out of the blue. “It is where I belong, and it is where I have been fulfilling my destinies. I have lived life outside of the kingdom before, believe it or not, and I found that, in the end, I prefer this. Of course, there are times when I wish for personal freedom... but unlike a few soldiers I have known, I am willing and able to make a life outside of war. I am a Major now, but I can still live a civilian’s life. Perhaps... you should try it sometime. I know you will like it.”

Beatrix gave him another smile, and a new cup of tea was poured for her since she had drained her last one. The woman sipped the dark liquid down, letting the steam cloud her face and warm her nose up. There were just some times when Steiner amazed her, and not just because he appeared to be a clumsy oaf most of the time. Privately, in the company of trusted friends, Adelbert could really awe his audience if they gave him the chance. Of course, what he said earlier was also true: he had been changed by Beatrix’s influence, and the woman had been changed by his.

...And Freya’s. And Freya’s. She couldn’t forget *her*.

“...So what will you do?” asked Steiner after a bit of silence. Beatrix shrugged.

“For now, I think I ought to stay with you for as long as I possibly can,” she said. “Steiner... we have wasted enough years already. I know that I expressed a few things here and there in the past, concerning our relationship, but I must now condemn every one of them. ‘Forget what I said, and pay attention to what I’m saying’.”

“Eh?”

“Protecting the King and Queen may not necessarily be our top priority anymore,” she said with a sly smile. “Think about it. They now have so many people watching over them: Tantalus, Freya and Fratley, Vivi, Quina, Lani, Erin, and everyone in the world council. Steiner, I believe that even the most dedicated person is entitled to selfishness every once in awhile. It is only human nature!!!”

“I see where this is going,” he smiled as he drained his own cup. “You want to forego your duty briefly to engage with a relationship with another person.”

“We *are* compatible,” she noted with a wink. The two knights held a good solid silence between

themselves, allowing each other to forget about everything else outside of their own selves. Duty, friends, the weather, even the hour of the night was all lost on them as they spent quiet time together, thankfully without a bit of interruption. Beatrix, feeling a little girlish (but she didn't care), leaned forth and placed a loving kiss on Steiner's cheek—not a peck, but a genuine kiss. He blushed a little, of course, and rubbed the place where her lips had touched.

“...What was that for?” The smile she gave him was so loving and sweet, it was hard to believe that this same woman had once freed an entire city infested with monsters.

“Because you've always been so good to me, especially when I didn't deserve it.”

“...Remind me to continue doing it!” he scoffed playfully. Beatrix chuckled, and allowed herself to laugh out as loud as she possibly dared. She didn't care whether anyone saw her, or questioned her, or scorned her actions. She could not be a General all the time; she was human, like everyone else, and she had the God-given right to live and to love.

A few more quiet but enjoyable minutes passed, with an intimacy going between the two knights that

teasingly bordered on the edge of romance. The hour grew dark and long, so much so that the bartender had long ago trusted the two of them to lock up for him. The sun would rise in roughly three or four hours, and yet neither one of them were tired or even concerned. They were enjoying this much-needed time together. Unfortunately, it did have to end, as Steiner grumbled as he glanced at a chiming grandfather clock.

“Dear me, is it four in the morning? Already?? My, how the time doth fly!” Beatrix gave him a careless smile, though he did not quite return it. ‘My dear,’ he sighed to her, “I am afraid to say this, but we must part. I must get a few hour’s rest for our date tomorrow.”

“Date? Tomorrow?? I don’t recall any of us setting up a date tomorrow!”

“I just did,” he added slyly. Beatrix grinned, and gave his arm a friendly slap. Steiner chuckled and tipped an imaginary hat as he left—but he soon slowly turned around, after thinking things over, and decided to go for broke. He leaned down and gently kissed Beatrix’s forehead, telling her of the enjoyable evening he had had, and that they should

do it again, sometime very soon, and on many more occasions as well.

Beatrix sure didn't lie when she said she would look forward to them all.

Zidane woke up by himself one frosty morning. The snow outside could not penetrate the warm castle innards—or, if it did, it was dulled to a considerable degree. He barely had to put on anything more than a robe to prepare himself for the day's chills (anything less would lead to *nothing*), and with a yawn, another day of calm, peace, tranquility, and et cetera had begun.

Not finding Garnet snuggling up at his side was a bit of a mystery, but he figured she had already woken up before him, and more than likely, she “didn't want to disturb [his] slumber” and had left to do whatever. For the moment, he headed off to the Royal Bath Room, to perform the usual acts that males tend to do in the mornings. He found himself entering the bathroom and found a bowled-over Garnet, looking very pale even for that time of year, and hurtling massive amounts of rejected bodily wastes into the toilet, via her mouth.

“Oh man!” he said and staggered. “Garnet, what’s wrong? Are you sick?”

“.....I don’t feel so well,” came a groaned reply. She briefly ceased her vomiting to hold her stomach and to give her husband a face that would prove her illness. Zidane was convinced immediately, and made a disgusted face himself as the beauty his wife normally had vanished a bit.

“You don’t *look* very well at all,” he remarked. He walked over to her during the lull and placed his hand on her forehead. “Jeez! You’re hot!”

“I know....It’s probably a fever,” she grumbled.

“No, I mean... yowza! You’re one hot chick!!” He grinned at her with his usual lewd grin, but the compliment did very little to cheer her up. She gave him a weak smile and said one word before erupting out in volcanic spewing fits again.

“...Thanks...	URRGGGHH!!!
GUURRRRKKK!!!!	BLEEEAAA!!!
BLUUGGH!!!”	

“Wow!” grimaced Zidane. He rubbed Garnet’s shoulders and poured a glass of water for her to swish around in her mouth. The illness had come rather suddenly—she had been okay the previous

day—so it might have been something she ingested from food. The way she vomited, though, she looked ready to puke out her own intestines.

“Honey, you okay?” he grunted, flushing the toilet several times to erase the smell of vomit. Garnet moaned and shed a few miserable tears before swishing down some water.

“I... think so,” she replied. “It might have been something I ate.”

“What’d ya have?”

“Yesterday? Umm, liverwurst, onions, sauerkraut, gysahl pickles, piece’a, vanilla ice cream, and mushrooms.”

“Ugh, no wonder you’re vomiting!” cringed Zidane. “I feel sick just *hearing* about some of that stuff!” Garnet smiled, and slowly cleaned herself up from the brief ordeal. Several glasses of water were swished and spat out, and one more was swallowed. Zidane wanted to take his wife to see Dr. Quban, but by the hour’s end, she insisted that she was perfectly fine. She also insisted to have salami, squid, beans, and tomato juice for lunch. Zidane questioned both of these as he guided Garnet out of the bathroom and into the kitchen.

It was a merry and bright morning outside, crisp to an exhilarating degree, and just cold enough to chill, but not overbearingly so. The sky was magnificently clear, the sun gave out blinding light, and all the flakes of snow that had been falling in the weeks before had now settled down on the ground. The entire kingdom and beyond was covered with pure white, from the roofs of the houses to the streets, from the castle to the barracks, from gardens to churches, and even the moat was frozen solid. Old man Winter had struck at Alexandria with a powerful vengeance, and the entire town was either bundled up indoors or running out in the snow.

Children by the dozens populated the snowy streets, splashing and playing like they were in the ocean. Snow-forts, snowmen (and their snow-families), ice statues, ice sculptures, snowballs, snow angels, and a dozen other wintry delights were being created left and right as the day's merriness and frozen warmth beckoned more and more people outside. A large group of children had declared a snowball war on everyone that walked, tossing and chucking wads of crystal mercilessly.

Several of the Vivis were out demonstrating their ice magic. Most of them were creating large blocks

of ice that were destined to become sculptures, and a few were helping with the snow-forts. A snow-war might have been declared if a few more kids were aggressive, but it did not get any larger than mere snow-skirmishes. Ice-skaters were even testing their mettle on the frozen moat, and the rivers and streams that surrounded the castle and church. It was a literal Winter Wonderland, even for those that detested snow. This was not a day to shovel the stuff, but to revel in it.

Freya and Fratley were cavorting with some of the children, acting as unwilling targets for the hundreds of tossed snow-bombs. They could squeal and scream as much as they desired, but the assault would never stop until Alexandria was void of snow and green again, and considering the downfall that had blanketed the whole area, that would take some time. They tried to fight back, but children throwing snowballs tend to be more tenacious than adults or Burmecians, though Fratley frightened a few away.

“I shall protect you, my lady!” he screamed as he dove to shield Freya. She giggled and twirled him around several times to protect herself better, and ended up locking her eyes onto his after a few good spins. Poor Fratley was both dizzy and covered with splatters of snow by that point, and Freya couldn’t

help but laugh out loud at her new husband's appearance. She remedied it quickly by giving him a warm smile, and an even warmer kiss.

“Oooooooooohhhhhh!!!” howled the children. The kiss only served to make them assault Freya and Fratley even more, and the kiss was forcibly broken as the two Burmecians were being pummeled. They laughed out loud and returned fire, and for most of the day, a great war of snowballs was being waged. More than one time, Fratley would wrestle Freya to the ground and sneak in a few kisses, but this would only end up in a big wrestling match, which Freya usually won.

During this time of much-needed peace, Lani committed herself to hunting down Blank and forcing him under the mistletoe. She had despised that winter tradition until very recently, when she discovered the thief in her travels. Since then, she had made it a habit of hers to cling onto him, and be as romantic as possible, poor girl (not as poor as Blank, obviously). On that particular day, Lani searched the snowy marketplace for the thief, covered in a heavy mink coat she had bought herself.

As Lani walked through the banks of snow, keeping an eye out for the redheaded thief, she smiled and allowed herself to let all worried and troubles go, not that she had any to begin with. These people were now completely accepting of her (to a point), and had practically forgotten about those times when she had been hunting the then-princess Garnet. Lani had been a bounty hunter way back then, serving anyone with a fat enough wallet, but the years changed and matured her into a *less*-manipulative and greedy woman (she still bore those characteristics in spades, but not quite as much as back then). She considered her knighthood into the kingdom her greatest honor.

Distracted by her thoughts just a bit, Lani nearly missed getting slugged by an errant snowball. The kid that threw it grinned and stuck his tongue out at Lani, and ran as fast as he could. The dark-skinned ex-bounty hunter, always a big fan of revenge, took up the chase and caught up with the kid despite the huge axe she carried (this was a new one, since her old one got broken during the war against Iudicium). Quickly she lifted the kid up by the collar of his shirt, much like she lifted Eiko up all those years ago, and glared into his face.

“What’s the big idea, squirt?” she demanded. “You almost hit me with that thing!”

“I wasn’t aimin’ for you, honest!” he replied. “Lemme go! Lemme go! I was aimin’ for Joey over there! He’s gettin’ away, he is!” Lani’s lip curled like an annoyed lioness, and she tossed the poor child into a large bank of snow. He sank in a little, undamaged but quite wet and cold.

“Well, watch where you’re shooting next time!” she stated. “If I wasn’t a Knight, I wouldn’t have gone so easy on you! Now scram, kid!” The little one stuck his tongue out at Lani and ran off again, but made it a point to never approach the older woman again. Lani groaned out a sigh, and went back to looking for Blank. She eventually found him, and another chase was on...

In the season of winter, Quina discovered the joy of fresh snow falling on one’s tongue, not that s/he could do anything about it. S/he became occupied not by hopping toads, but by the gentle flakes that fell down onto the ground from time to time. On that day, all the flakes were on the ground, just waiting to be scooped up into frozen delights. Quina took

advantage of the ice, and scooped several buckets full of the stuff. S/he then began serving them on cones to the children that passed by, often flavoring the stuff to give it an edge. Naturally, since snow was free, the cones were as well.

“Get your ice-cold dessert treats!” called the Qu. ‘Free for all, free for all! Worry-worry not about spoiling appetites! Snow eaten very easily! Eat-eat, while it is still in stock!’ Children flocked around Qu like birds flocking around a spilled bag of seeds, but the Qu’s neglectful attitude concerning the “real” food was not quite so entertaining. Hot food was the rage, especially piece’a, and the biggest patrons in the kingdom were haunting around the Qu as s/he blissfully handed out treats.

Their Majesties Zidane and Garnet had become more accustomed to wandering outside and surveying the land since their marriage—not that either one of them liked being cooped up anyway. Zidane had grown since his days as a thief, and not just in physical build, though that was different. His hair was still relatively long, though shears had been placed to it more often. He still had the spark and smile of one innocent and free in the world, though countless wars and hours of darkness had taken much of that away. He was more of a man now than

a boy, especially after all the weeks he spent training to look the part of a king. His shoulders were erect instead of slumped, his posture was almost completely perfect, the way he spoke was much more elegant and refined, and every subtle feature that had once defined him had now changed into one that bore more maturity and dignity.

Garnet, who had been raised as a Princess though her blood denied it, had changed very little, except that her face was just as war-torn and wise as her husband's, and of course, she was missing her left arm. The loss of such an appendage was staggering at first, but through lots of treatment and therapy, she learned to work and live without it. Reading was a chore, though, as it was dreadfully hard to turn pages with her right hand, and eating was also a bit of a hassle, but other than that, she seemed to get by.

A few very brilliant doctors and mechanics had offered to construct a replacement arm, but with some exception, she really had not the use of it. She accepted their offer anyway, out of convenience, though an actual project had just barely begun by that time. For the moment, she was merely armless, though still radiant by any standards. Zidane constantly thought of her as his beautiful jewel, his angel, his canary, and would have done so no matter

what. The snowy day only helped to bring out this great heavenly radiance.

As Zidane and Garnet walked through the land, hand in hand and wintry outfits covering their bodies, they smiled and greeted everyone they came across. Zidane was no longer so lewd around other people, and whenever he did flirt, it was usually harmless, or else a compliment, or else geared towards good female friends. The King was beloved no matter what he did—the people of Alexandria had grown to adore his mischievous antics, and already, one could not think of Alexandria ever being the same without him.

Guards smiled and saluted as Garnet and Zidane passed them, both monarchs completely thankful that they wore winter clothes as well. The outfits they previously had, the ones that bared all the leg, were a bit too revealing and terrible in any weather that was not warm. Surprisingly, it had been Zidane who ratified to issue out new uniforms (ones that would go down to the knee), and nobody complained in the least, except for those few Pluto Knights who appreciated a woman with good legs.

Garnet sneezed.

“Take care, Dagger,” smiled Zidane as he patted her back. “Not that I wouldn’t mind if you turned into a fairy. Say, are you sure you’re not coming down with something?”

“I feel fine, sweetheart!” she assured him brightly. “That sneeze was just... well, it was a sneeze, that’s all. You know what they say: ‘Sometimes a sneeze is just a sneeze’.”

“I think that’s ‘cigar’, love.”

“Whatever,” she smiled. “Hey, sweetheart?”

“Yeah?”

“Catch!!” Before Zidane could react, a huge snowball smashed into his face, courtesy of his wife Garnet. She giggled and ran away as fast as she could; he, on the other hand, wiped his face and gathered a few balls for a counterstrike.

“Oh no you don’t!” he shouted. ‘You won’t get away from me! Hey, kids!’ The children scattered around Alexandria turned around and looked to see what he wanted. “C’mere! Help me get back at Dagger, will ya?”

“You want us to attack the Queen?!” they balked.

“Not for real! Just throw a few snowballs at her! See, she got me good in the face!” Zidane pointed to the spot where Garnet had struck, giving the kids a very wicked idea. They all glared at him, and at the same time, every one of them threw a ball of slush where he had been pointing. Every one smacked him, nearly sending him to the floor, and every kid scampered away before the King could exact his revenge.

Groaning, Zidane could barely pick up the sound of beautiful laughter. He turned around, wiping the snow out of his face, and saw his wife smiling at him, red in the face and nearly doubled over.

“Sorry,” she grinned. “They were on my side. I promised them a kiss each in advance if they would throw snowballs at you.”

“Ack, no, you didn’t!” he whined. “Betrayed by my own wife! Stabbed in the back by a scheming Dagger! Led astray by this Canary that I trusted, blinded by the radiance of this Jewel! *Et tu*, Garnet? Garnet, the woman who shares my bed, my flesh, my soul?! Garnet, the future mother of my children—*our* children?! NOO!!”

“Oh, don’t be such a baby,” she smiled as she leaned on her knees. The woman looked

illuminating as she knelt there, her cheeks flushed and crimson from the cold, her brown eyes sparkling with love, her long dark hair flowing freely from a fuzzy hat, an unzipped white vest shielding a heavy orange shirt and pants, the smile on her red lips...

“...You’re so mean,” pouted Zidane. She grinned and rubbed his hair gently.

“I thought you liked it when I was mean. That’s what you say in bed all the time. ‘Be a mean girl, Garnet! Show me how bad you can be, Garnet! Garnet, you’re such a naughty little girl!’ Blah blah blah.”

“(Let’s not discuss that here,)” grunted Zidane under his breath. She gave him another beautiful smile, and in return, Zidane dunked his wife’s head in the snow. Truly, revenge was a dish best served cold...

While the weather outside was at one time frightful, the fire inside the tavern was always delightful, especially in the company of good friends and loved ones. Steiner had both: a friendly tender who kept the drinks coming, and a lovely young woman that had been the object of his desires for a

very long time. At that moment, he considered himself quite a lucky man, an ale in one hand and the attention of Lady Beatrix in the other. At that particular moment, the two were on their second or third date (they never bothered to keep count), and were enjoying the quiet of the moment instead of the mindless play outside (though Steiner wouldn't mind frolicking if it was with Beatrix!).

“It’s just been on my mind for a long time now,” said Beatrix, concerning her retirement. “I think, in all honesty, that I should retire sometime soon. I need a break from fighting, and besides, I want to find out what I was placed on this earth to do. I have a destiny, Bert, but I’ve never been given the chance to figure it out. What do you think yours is?”

“My life has always been in Alexandria,” he replied with a smile. “It is the only home I have known. My family is very small, and I have set a precedent already by being the first knight in it. I am merely content to serve and protect others, especially those whom I love and trust.” Obviously, those last two descriptions had been aimed squarely at Beatrix, but whether or not she picked it up was unknown.

“...Is that really what you want? I don’t mean to judge, but is that what really makes you content?”

“Yes.”

“I understand. And Steiner—Adelbert, I mean,” (he smiled when she called him by name), “I love this job too, I really do. But unlike you, I don’t think it’s what I was meant to do. It’s just that... I feel like there are other things that I could be doing, other places I could be going to, other people that I could see. I... well, it might be false, but I don’t think I’ve ever really known what personal freedom was. I have... never lived out on my own. It was either the circus or here. Do you understand what I am saying?”

“Certainly,” he replied. Beatrix looked beautiful in that moment they shared, not that she was otherwise during any other time. Dressed not in the light wear of an Alexandrian General, but instead in a heavy wool sweater and leggings, she continued to exude a gorgeous look. Her hair was still wavy and brown, like liquid wood, just silky and comforting in the grip of a person’s hand, and her eyes—both of them, exposed for all to see—were lovely and soft with just a trace of vulnerability to them.

It had been a love that grew and blossomed into a gentle flower, and not having shot up randomly like some unwanted weed—the love these two unlikely yet fitting people shared. Flowers were always more welcome than weeds, and their slow growth into beauty was more appreciated as well.

She had come to him, to a man she could trust with her innermost secrets, and poured heart and soul out in hopes of comfort, consolidation, and council. She came to the right man; Steiner was not always a quick thinker, but he certainly came through for Beatrix whenever she needed him. Some people saw the female General as an indomitable pillar of strength, but she could be just as weak and insufficient as anyone else. Steiner truly was a good conversationalist, once one got past his blocky head and his big mouth. He was as good a confidante as Freya, and in Beatrix's eye, a little bit more attractive (then again, Freya was not exactly a human being).

AND HE DIDN'T REVEL IN TEASING THE POOR WOMAN!!!!

"Winter is my favorite time of the month," remarked Beatrix suddenly. Steiner eyed her questionably.

“Eh? Why?” She gave him a smile, warm and loving with just a hint of lewdness in it, and kept it at that as the date progressed. She let him figure it out for himself.

Winter days concluded too quickly.

The sun had long ago left the stage, giving way to a long cold night. Instead of flakes of snow, stars covered the air instead, glowing brightly across the universe. Their illumination was best attributed to the magic that was always in the air that time of year: a combination of cold temperatures, falling crystals, smoking chimneys, mistletoe that attracted lovers, songs and dances that gathered good friends, warm drinks and food, a hint of bells, and a time where nights were silent and all was calm. The season of Winter was indeed loved by many, for it was but a beautiful precursor to warmer times, a predecessor to spring and love and life again, and new years, and new people, et cetera.

Zidane and Garnet, after spending much of their day outdoors, came inside to a small but fulfilling dinner, made mostly out of soups, rolls, and a few slices of goose and ham. Everything was devoured,

and it was decided that upon the next day, a feast would be held that gathered together the brunt of the monarchs' friends. It was just that time of year, a time to feast with friends, and to gather together, and share stories, and be with each other, and bask warmly in the envelope of peace that the country had worked so hard to achieve.

After dinner, Zidane and Garnet had their baths (separately), and went to bed tired but satisfied. The day had been good, with the single exception of Garnet's brief illness, and perhaps the betrayal incident. Zidane got back at his wife for that, and she apologized and professed that it had all been in good fun, and of course he forgave her by literally kissing and making up. Those two were just plain good for each other, and even Beatrix and Steiner had to admit that they were a great pair. Any remaining doubts had left long before rumors of Iudicium came whispering across the plains.

Zidane and Garnet retired to their room after bathing, both of them dressed in robes and looking quite good after a wash. They embraced and caressed each other, both of them content to look at the one they loved, and a single kiss was placed before they parted.

“Any news from the doc?” asked Zidane as he disrobed. Garnet’s face flushed suddenly, and she froze briefly before removing her robe.

“...Actually, yes.”

“Is it about that illness?”

“.....In a way,” she muttered, “but it’s not what you think. I... well... it’s a strange thing, really...”

“So are you sick or something?” he asked. Garnet shook her head.

“Zidane... do you know what it means when a woman is especially ill in the mornings, and her hormones are a bit... abnormal... and her eating habits become strange?”

“I... really can’t say that I do,” he admitted. “Why, is there something wrong?”

“No, there’s nothing wrong at all,” she smiled shyly. “All those symptoms are normal for... well, my ‘condition’.”

“Condition? Garnet, if you’re not sick, then what are you?” She smiled brightly at him, her face turning quite pink, and her heart fluttering just a little bit more. The anticipation was gripping.

“...I’m pregnant.”

“Oh, is that all?” Zidane smiled casually, placed his hands on his hips, nodded his head victoriously, and fell over on the bed in a faint.

Retirement.

Destiny.

Freedom.

Happiness.

What are these words? What do they mean? What is their purpose? Why do they continue to haunt me so? Why are they invading my mind? And why can I not get them out of my thoughts?

Many years ago, or so it seemed, I dealt with these same issues, but on a much smaller scale. I was going through a change in my life back then—I was going through a metamorphosis. I had just emerged from a war, or at least a small part of it, and I came out with questions on my mind and a weary feeling on my blood-stained hands. “Beatrix the Blood-Stained”, eh? Beatrix the Blood-Stained, questioning things that didn’t have an answer, and

trying to find answers to questions that nobody asked.

I was confused, but perhaps I wanted to deny this confusion. I wanted to believe that the war had been the final act for me, and that once it was all over, I would be left with little else to do except leave the land. I believed that my purpose was served, and that I had no more use in a land so peaceful. Nowadays, I am grateful that I stayed behind. If I had left as I originally intended, what would have become of this kingdom? I would not like to consider it. I don't want to think of what would have happened to Garnet, or Zidane, or Steiner, and I certainly don't want to know what would have happened to Freya. My additional presence here was a blessing... but now...

I now truly believe that we have peace. There has been no rumors of any malice anywhere, and I don't think there's an enemy around that would be foolish enough to attack a kingdom that defeated Kuja, Kyahar Ignus, or Vikar Iudicium. But all that aside, I believe that it really is time for my retirement. I have served this kingdom for half of my life—for half of my life, I have been serving others, and sacrificing my freedom and my desires for other people. Granted, it has been an enjoyable time for

me, even during those very dark hours. I could never forget my first introduction to Queen Garnet, who was then just the orphaned child of two unknown summoners. I, as an aspiring knight, was placed to be her personal bodyguard, along with a man called Adelbert Steiner, and through times warm and strict, I loved it all.

I can say that my life was spent well while in the service of Alexandria, and that I have officially earned freedom for the rest of my life. A part of my soul has been sewn into the Alexandrian tapestry, but I feel as if I need to venture out into other cities, other kingdoms, other worlds. I need to do something that General Beatrix Francine de Alexandria would never do. I need to go places she has never seen, and eat foods she never ate, and experience situations that she never had the chance to.

I love this kingdom—in fact, there is nothing here that I don't love. I have even grown fond of Lani and those crazy Tantalus people. They are all precious members of my adopted family! But... as this is my home, one cannot stay in their home forever. One must be allowed to fly free, and to see other skies, and to live life according to their own wishes. I so badly want to be freed...

Steiner, dear Adelbert, has been a very good and patient man concerning my plans and thoughts. He listens like none other, and as always, has given me sound advise to follow. I should like to speak with Freya soon, and the King and Queen as well, and maybe a few others that I trust well enough. I feel, though, that they would support me just as much as Steiner has. This is just such a difficult period in my life, I'm going to need all the help and support I can find.

But first, this piece'a...!

Freya was largely unaware of Beatrix's plans. For the moment, she was standing by herself on one of the hidden balconies that Alexandria castle had, the very same one she attempted suicide on. The view was still spectacular, perhaps more so now that the land was covered in snow and ice. The air was thin and crisp, and stung her lungs and throat just slightly as she breathed it in. It was a great place to relax in privacy, or to simply get a good view of the surrounding land. She was glad that she was in a more cheerful mood to enjoy it, and not so suicidal.

"...Suicidal..." she scoffed under her breath. She grinned, and laughed her darkest hour away, giving way to the famous adage, "One of these days, you're

going to look back on this moment and laugh”. Laugh she did. That suicidal moment, she figured, had been the catalyst that changed her life around for the better, as well as the life of Beatrix. Everything seemed to focus on that day, or else the day that Beatrix and Steiner finally rebelled against Brahne, or else the day when the two female warriors discovered their past together. Those had been the pivotal turning points for so many people, not just herself or her friend. In any case, the memory was welcomed.

“Such a beautiful view...” sighed Freya as she leaned up against a cold pillar. She had on a light fur coat and her usual dragoon hat, and breeches for her legs, but because of the fur that covered most of her body, she would not need anything heavier—a blessing of being from Burmecia. In this age where war was lacking, it was good to focus her attention on very minor details, such as what she was wearing, and the view from atop a balcony. Too often she got caught up in such large-scale things, and she would forget the smallest and simplest matters that life had to offer. Today was a day of quiet thought, contemplation, philosophy, and lovemaking (she added the last one for fun).

Freya's ears were sensitive, but they didn't hear Beatrix sneaking up. The holy knight smiled mischievously as she approached her friend, and with a single leap, she smacked the back of Freya's shoulders, nearly startling the woman out of her fur.

“Boo!”

“D’uhh!!!” Freya leaped up, turned around, and glared at her closest friend with plenty of rage. Her pulse didn't need to be so high in such a peaceful world. “You immature little brat! How dare you sneak up on me!”

“I can't help it if you don't hear me coming!” chuckled Beatrix. Freya scowled and sighed, but decided to leave the matter alone, as she was still in a relatively good mood.

“What do you want?” she groaned wearily. Beatrix smiled at her friend with love, and chastised her bland comment.

“Now really, Freya, is that any way to greet your lifelong friend?”

“Some friend,” muttered Freya. “You take every chance you can to tease me or sneak up on me or... do some other immature thing to me.”

“Only because I love you,” smiled Beatrix. “Freya, I haven’t had a real, genuine friend for most of my life. As much as she wants to, I really can’t be friends with Her Majesty, and I think we all know by now that Steiner and I are more than friends. I told you, I don’t know how to act around other people. I guess... seeing you just brings out the child in me. You know I don’t mean to hurt you...” Beatrix stepped forward and put her hand on Freya’s arm, letting her eyes mold into the dragoon’s, and smiled. It was terribly hard for Freya to resist such fondness.

“...Don’t look at me like that,” she sighed. “Beatrix...”

“What?”

“...Nothing. I guess I just sometimes forget about those quirky little conditions of yours.”

“Quirky?!”

“Don’t I have the right to tease you as well?” smiled Freya coyly. “Admit it, Bea: you don’t like your own tricks being used on you.” Beatrix grinned happily, and gave her friend a gentle push.

“Shut *up*! Why are you picking on me? I wanted to have a serious discussion with you!”

“*That* failed!” snorted Freya. Another push was given unto her.

“Shut UP! You’re terrible!”

“I get it from you, dear!”

“Shut *UP*! Hahahahahahaha!!” Beatrix and Freya broke out in smiles, for no real reason at all, and their friendship was saved from another nasty teasing and jibing war.

Sighing, Beatrix and Freya shared the view together, their arms around each other’s shoulders. It truly was a spectacular scene, best shared with good friends and loved ones, and one best suited for peaceful or happy occasions. Death and darkness just didn’t suit such a place, yet it was gloom that brought the brightest light of all into the lives of the two women standing there.

“You wanted to talk about something?” said Freya, her tail waving slowly. Beatrix nodded her head.

“Yeah. I’ve already talked to Steiner about this, but I wanted your opinion as well.”

“Hm. Your boyfriend over your best friend, eh?”

“Quiet,” hissed Beatrix as she gave Freya a gentle pinch. “Anyway, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, ever since I got back. I’ve been wondering if there’s a life for me outside of these castle walls, and I’ve been heavily considering the chance to see if my thought is correct. It’s not like I’m growing tired of the place, I just want to... I dunno, experience real freedom. I... Well...”

“Go on,” whispered Freya. “I’m listening.” Beatrix smiled. Freya was precious to her, as an earpiece and as a friend. Sure, she could be an annoyance whenever she chose to tease the knight, but it was really all in good fun, a peculiar expression of their love for each other. It signified that they were more like sisters than anything else.

“Thanks. Anyway, Freya... I’ve been thinking that it’s time for me to finally retire from my position. The time is right: we just went through a terrifying war, and this kingdom is peaceful and calm. There are plenty of people around to protect the King and Queen, and I am confident that we have the right people seated on the throne. Zidane and Garnet are young, but they’ve proven themselves under the harshest circumstances. I have faith in them, faith enough to consider retiring.”

Silence.

Freya quietly snuggled a little closer to her friend—perhaps because it was cold, or perhaps because she wanted to demonstrate her support. Maybe both.

“You are serious?”

“Yes, I am. I know this sounds like *déjà vu*, but this time I genuinely think that it’s time for me to leave this kingdom. What do you think?”

“You have most certainly earned it,” indicated the mousy woman. “You’ve done quite a bit for this kingdom, more so than any other person could. You’ve went above and beyond the call of duty, and you’ve been so selfless and sacrificing that it’s about time you’ve served yourself. Beatrix, I can’t tell you what to do, but if you want my advise... follow your heart. Follow your dreams. Do whatever you feel you should be doing. If you truly feel the need to retire, and venture out there, then I shall support you all the way. You have me as an eternal companion, dear.”

Beatrix smiled warmly, and gazed into Freya’s face as she declared her dedication to the woman. Precious friends like her were hard to find: those that would follow her anywhere, and be unto her as

a pillar or crutch, and accompany her in times of darkness and light... Freya was a rarity, and Beatrix was honored to have such a person as her as a friend. Whereas Freya thought she would not be so strong without Beatrix, it was Beatrix who thought she was weaker without Freya. The two women complimented and completed each other well, just as Steiner and Beatrix completed each other and Freya and Fratley completed each other. It was now impossible to conceive that the two had at one time been the bitterest of enemies, and now they were almost literally inseparable.

“Thank you, dear friend,” smiled Beatrix warmly. “You and Steiner are very good to me. I don’t deserve such wonderful people in my life... but, oh well.” Beatrix grinned, and placed her hand on Freya’s cheek. She suddenly leaned in and placed a very brief kiss on the woman’s mouth—wherein said woman lurched away and began gagging.

“G’ahh!! Yeuucchh!! Ptooie! Ack, I’ve been poisoned!”

“Oh, don’t be such a big baby!” laughed Beatrix. “That wasn’t even a sisterly peck! Dummy!” Freya continued to spit and wipe her mouth, a mixture of anger, confusion, and surprise on her face—mostly

anger—and buried her mouth in the snow that had gathered on the rail to really purify herself.

“Blech! Bleah! Gurkk!! Guhh!!”

“Oh, my dear, was it really that bad?” asked Beatrix with genuine concern in her voice. Freya growled and managed to speak through her sleeve.

“No... I just didn’t expect you to bloody *do* it! Jeez! *Warn* me next time you suddenly go insane!” Beatrix chuckled, and made a genuine vow to alert her friend in case of a sudden attack of mindlessness. ‘And by the way,’ added the dragoon, “the next time you’re feeling all giddy, why don’t you kiss Major Steiner instead? Crazy little girl...”

“I love you too,” smiled Beatrix. Freya snorted, and turned around to enter back into the castle. “Oh wait, where are you going? Are you mad at what I did? I’m sorry; I just... well, I guess my mind did slip a little there.”

“No... I made too big a deal of it. It was nothing. I guess if it’s from you, I don’t mind all that much,” replied the dragoon. “I’m just going back home, to have hot steamy erotic sex with the man I happen to be married to.” Beatrix’s face turned rose-red, and now it was her turn to be embarrassed by her friend.

Freya, satisfied that she had shamed Beatrix so, tipped her hat and left the balcony—but not before accidentally bumping into Zidane.

“Hey, did somebody here mention sex? Oh, hey Beatrix, Freya! What are you two up to?”

“It’s not what you think, highness,” sighed Beatrix wearily, noticing the lewd smile he had on. “We’re just behaving normally. But what brings you up here, sire?”

“Huh? Oh, uh, I was lookin’ for you two. I have some good news for you!”

“What’s that?” asked Freya. Zidane grinned, and the tiny dam he had built up to keep the “news” in broke easily and quickly.

“You’re not gonna believe this, but in about nine months, I’m gonna be a daddy! That’s right! Garnet’s pregnant!!!!” The King had an overbearingly-ecstatic look on his face, more blinding than the winter sun, and a smile about three kilometers long stretched out on his face. Beatrix and Freya, who had already divulged “too much information” upon each other as it was, merely gave their friend and liege two faces full of surprise and amazement.

“...It just keeps getting weirder and weirder around here,” muttered the dragoon. Beatrix agreed.

“Yup.”

To be continued...

12. Free

Part Twelve: Free

The inevitability of the prospect didn't excuse Beatrix from thinking about it anyway. It was almost certain, almost 100% *positive* that she would go through with it, without any trace of doubt or thought at all. It really was to be expected, this decision of hers. And why would it not be? For half her life, she had mended and defended Kingdom Alexandria, in times of peace and war. Had she not earned a true rest? Had she not earned a retirement? Did she not deserve to have the rest of her life in her own hands, to be able to have freedom, and to determine what would happen by her own will, and not the words of another? Of course.

The real enigma was whether or not she would do it, the question was why was she thinking about it still. Lady Beatrix was resting on her bed one common wintry morning, her body and mind in a state of lull as she stared up at the ceiling, her feet dangling over the side and touching the floor. *Her* bed. *Her* room. *Her* ceiling. *Her* thoughts, *her* dilemma, *her* freedom. It had been the first time she

really gave any of that any thought. It all seemed very minor until now, when she seriously gave retirement a thought. But now, everything that was now merely hers, had now been transformed into “HERS”, if one could tell the difference.

A sigh came out of her mouth.

I won't be staying here any longer, she thought to herself. In a few days, maybe even in a week, I'm going to be leaving. I actually made my decision already—I must go, for myself and no one else. It is time, I believe, to think about myself, at least for a little while. I'm entitled to pleasuring myself every so often, aren't I? This move, this “stepping-down”, will be as pleasing as I can think, until some other happy day comes by. I've already made up my mind, but the strange thing is, I haven't told anybody yet. Not Freya, not Steiner, not Garnet or Zidane, nobody. I'm the only one that knows.

So why am I laying here, looking at the ceiling?

...Because I don't think I've ever given that ceiling a look.

I'm going to miss this ceiling when I'm gone.

Well, no time like the present. Better get up and start gathering support. Telling Freya and Steiner's

going to be tough as it is; I wonder how their Majesties will take it.

The time: Mere days before Lady Beatrix of Alexandria retires indefinitely.

The place: The room of Lady Beatrix, the place that houses everything she has ever owned.

The players: One single woman who is at the turning point in her life, preparing herself to transfer from one existence to another.

Status: Deliberation.

Describing the day outside was bland. It had snowed again, leaving the entire area covered in white, and few people save for the children were really enjoying the day. The old folks went “Bah!” and huddled close to the fires, and adults said ‘Who needs snow?’ and began shoveling it out of their way, and the kids squealed as they held onto their youth for another year. Beatrix said, “Just whiskey” when she went into the bar.

“Whiskey?” said Steiner as he looked over to her. “Lady Beatrix, are you feeling well? In all my years knowing you, you have never drank—”

“Whiskey, Chester,” she repeated to the bartender, “whiskey.”

“Okay, I ain’t your papa...” The tender gave her a shot, and Beatrix held it in her hand. Freya, who was sipping down coffee, gave Beatrix a wary eye before inquiring.

“Trouble?”

“Hm?”

“Is there trouble? You ordered whiskey. I’ve never known you to be a serious drinker.” Beatrix paused, thinking of the best answer, and replied steadily.

“I just need to take the edge off of my thoughts,” she said as she downed the drink. Steiner and Freya warned her not to swallow it all at once—but by that time, the glass was empty. Beatrix grinned at them, made a funny face, and shook her head.

“...*That* took something off!” she shouted. “Wow! Yikes! I feel like there’s knives in my brain—and in my throat!”

“Whiskey can do that,” said Freya as she drank her coffee. Concern marred her face, and she gave

her friend an attentive look. “Trixie, honey, are you all right? What’s bothering you?”

“I know what it is,” offered Steiner. ‘It’s concerning that business about you retiring, isn’t it?’ Both Beatrix and Freya gave him a look, and when combined, their faces had enough confusion, worry, and disbelief on them to feed a person. Steiner coughed, realizing he had let the rat out of the bag, and decided to elaborate. “Am I right?”

“I have lots of things on my mind,” said Beatrix as she ordered more hard liquor. Freya snorted.

“Not if you keep drinking! Beatrix, this is news to me! I mean, I’ve heard you mention retirement every so often, but I didn’t think you gave it any serious thought! And I certainly didn’t think that you had come to a conclusion already!” Beatrix nodded her head and swiped the hair out of her face. Leave it up to Steiner to bring something like that out on the open. Oh well. At least she didn’t have to beat around the bush anymore.

“Well, I did, about two days ago,” said the General. “I’ve made up my mind. I’m leaving once and for all. I’ve deserved it, don’t you think? I’ve already told both of you what I think and how I feel, and now I’m left with telling their Majesties about it.

Oh, and Adelbert? Please, I know how much you care about me, but please don't stop me this time. I've seriously made up my mind, and there isn't anything you can say that would convince me otherwise." Steiner gave her a warm smile, and nodded his head slowly. He understood her perfectly well, and would not get in the way of her ambitions again.

"I understand. I will let you leave the kingdom. You *have* earned the right to live your own life." Beatrix returned his smile, and tilted her head over so that her hair cascaded to one side.

"Thank you, Steiner. You've always been good to me, especially when I didn't deserve it. That's why I like you: you're a blockhead, but you sure do know how to treat a person. I'm going to miss you the most when I'm gone." She leaned forward and kissed his cheek, then went back to swallow a second glass of whiskey. Beatrix grimaced and made a funny face, and shook her head until her senses returned. She turned her head and smiled at her dearest friend, who had been minding her business most of the time.

"Don't even think about it," she said suddenly. Beatrix was left puzzled.

“Think about what?”

“Kissing me,” she said as she sipped. “I know you’re going to do it, but don’t.”

“I wasn’t!!” insisted Beatrix. Freya snorted and gave Steiner a smile.

“This girl is a loon,” she said as she poked her friend. “Loony, loony, loony. You’d never know just from looking at her, but she’s really a child at heart.”

“Do shut up, you dirty rat,” moaned poor Beatrix. Freya laughed out loud and slapped her friend’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry. I’m only mean to you because I love you, dear.”

“Some way of showing your love...” muttered the poor knight. Freya laughed again; Steiner, poor dear sweet loveable Steiner, mumbled something that guaranteed himself a place in Beatrix’s heart.

“*I* would never tease you, milady...” Beatrix smiled warmly, sighed, and gave him a loving gaze.

“I know. That’s another reason why I like you. Unlike some people who call themselves my friends, you never make sport of me!”

“I’m just kidding, Trixie!!” insisted Freya in a loud voice. “For the sake of the Creator, dear! I don’t *mean* any of it! Friends do that sort of thing to each other!!”

“Well, I didn’t know that when I was growing up,” huffed Beatrix as she drank a glass of cold water. “I was rather short on friends. Pax?”

“Of course. I’m sorry for being a jackass.”

“That is putting it mildly...”

“Oh, go hang yourself!” snapped Freya as she gave her friend a gentle push. Beatrix chuckled, and pushed Freya in return. The girls would have fought it out right then and there, had dear Sir Fratley not arrived and saved the day. He split them up, giving them both a sagely look in the eye.

“Merciful heavens, ladies!” he exclaimed. “I don’t know whether you’re good friends or still fighting each other! Honestly! You both are acting like children!”

“We’re only like this because we’re too bloody drunk,” answered his wife. “And I think Beatrix here is experiencing great happiness.”

“Not particularly—I’m just a little drunk,” answered the knight. “In all seriousness, Freya, I’m just worried about what their Majesties would think. You and I can goof off and still love each other, and I really do cherish that, but... I just...”

“We’ll be here for you if you need us,” said Steiner gently. He and Freya both placed their hands on Beatrix’s shoulder, and she thanked them from the bottom of her heart. After hearing the news, Fratley put his support with theirs as well, and a final toast was made before anybody left the bar.

“Thank you, all of you,” sighed Lady Beatrix as she left the tavern with her friends. “It’s through wonderful friends like you all that I am able to be strong. If I can gain such support from the King and Queen, and if I have their blessings, then I will be content. Oh, how I will miss this place!”

Unaware of Beatrix’s desires, for the most part, Garnet and Zidane slowly digested through all the papers they had to sign and laws they had to ratify. More money needed to be sent to rebuild Burmecia. More people had sent in applications for knighthood. A band of thieves were making demands. This

person and that person were arguing over land. The border guards were asking for better pay. The grain in storage was getting low. Just normal political business that they both detested.

“I need an adventure!” moaned Zidane as he signed off another paper. “I want to see mountains and rivers, and sail on boats and airships! Being stuffed up in this room is the pits!” Garnet sighed, but couldn’t help grinning or agreeing with him.

“You know what? So do I. Let’s go somewhere wild and crazy tonight!”

“Nah, it’s cold,” he sneered. “Besides, shouldn’t we start preparing for that baby?”

“It won’t be due for... oh, perhaps seven or eight months. I’m not even showing!”

“Okay. But let’s take a break at least. These papers aren’t going anywhere.”

“Agreed.” Garnet and Zidane both stood out of their chairs, stretched heavily, and groaned until their bodies recovered from sitting down so much. Zidane warmly hugged his wife from behind, tracing his hands over her still-flat stomach, and carefully guided them upwards, to where her chest was.

“Hey, stop!” giggled Garnet gently. “Don’t do that! At least not in public!”

“Nobody’s around,” he whispered into her ear. She blushed and chuckled again, and would have let him chase her halfway across the kingdom if a sudden knocking hadn’t broken their moment. Both young monarchs sighed wearily, and gave sheepish smiles to each other as their intimacy was interrupted.

“Oh, well. Who is it?!”

“It’s Beatrix, highness!” It was Beatrix.

“You may enter!” called Garnet. Beatrix entered into the throne room, followed by Steiner, Fratley, and Freya. They all either saluted or kneeled out of respect, and at first, it seemed as if this was just going to be another report or social call. When Beatrix stood up, the King and Queen noticed that she had a very unsure look on her face, like she was actually nervous in front of them. Beatrix had not been nervous in front of royalty since her first years in the kingdom, so something was troubling her. Still, Zidane and Garnet remained cheerful.

“Why, what a pleasant surprise to see all of you!” exclaimed Garnet. “Are you all on an outing?”

Zidane and I were just talking, and we figured that a few hours spent outside these stuffy old walls would do us all good.”

“A novel idea, Majesty!” boomed Steiner proudly—then he said “Oh...”, remembered why they were all there, and slinked back slightly. Beatrix paid him little mind, bowed to her lieges again, and began her speech.

“.....I... have something very difficult to say to both of you,” she began. “I don’t know how I’m going to get it across, and I’m actually fairly nervous about the whole thing. These three you see before you have come to support me in this time of need, so you’ll forgive me if I suddenly act out of line.”

“It’s okay, dear,” smiled Garnet. “We’re all friends here.”

“Yeah! There’s nothing you could say that would upset us!” Beatrix smiled at her king, a man who had once been a rascally thief and a temporary student of hers, a man who cursed and swore and stole (treasures and hearts), a man who led the kingdom in its darkest hours, and felt a little better. Zidane had that kind of affect on people.

“...Then, permit me to continue,” she said. “My honorable lieges—no, my dear and cherished friends...” Before she could talk, Freya and Steiner stepped forward and held her hands, and Fratley placed his hands on her shoulder. She smiled, drew support from them all, and continued.

“I have given much consideration and thought to my future,” she began. “...And... as difficult as this may be to hear, but I feel as if my future is not in Alexandria. My King, my Queen, I have served this land for almost fifteen years, about half my entire life, and through my sword and my will, peace has prevailed and enemies have fallen. I have become a changed person, on the field of battle and in the struggle of my own heart. I have gained precious friends, and have embraced my past, and found that I have a large group of people in this kingdom that love me, and that I consider family, every one of them.

“But now, I have been thinking that it is at last time for me to hang up my sword and armor for good, and retire from my services as a knight and General, and depart from this land. I feel it is time for me to seek out my own destiny, to become my own servant and master, and to follow nobody’s will but my own. I feel I have earned this at least, and

with your permission and blessing, I would like to end my services under the banner of Alexandros. Your Highnesses, my Lieges, the decision is yours. I place my life in your hands for what I feel to be the final time, if it is your will. That's all I have to say."

"Beatrix..."

Queen Garnet, who now shouldered the responsibility of deciding her top General's fate, took a few cautious steps towards the older woman. Beatrix had just given a stirring plea to her lieges, permitting her to retire and leave the kingdom permanently. It was eerily reminiscent of a few years earlier, after the fight against Kuja and Garland, when the General had very similar notions in her mind. A rumor went around that she had stayed solely because of Steiner's request, and later, because of the wars the kingdom went through, but now that there was peace without and within, she honestly had a good reason to leave at last.

So of course, Garnet took the entire matter with queenly deliberation.

"I knew this day would come," she said gently. "I thought... after the fight with Kuja... you were

serious, and I am glad that you decided to stay for a few more years. You've been one of the many pillars of strength that kept this kingdom up, and for that, I thank you. I guess... it really is time to let you go, then."

"You mean... I have your leave?" Garnet smiled and nodded at her friend, who grew instantly relieved the moment her Queen gave her the decision.

"Yes. You know, there is a sort of parable in these parts, about a mother who was growing tense when her child was preparing to leave home. The child was all grown up, and ready to face the world on his own. The mother was reluctant to let her son leave the house, but knew that in order to stretch his wings out to their fullest length, he had to be set free.

"General, in all the years that I've known you, I have rarely granted you any requests. In fact, except for a few on your birthdays, I really have not done anything for you. Of course, I was your Princess, and now I am your Queen, but I would rather think of myself as your friend, as a young woman in whom you can trust and rely upon, and who would be willing to do a few favors for you every once in

awhile. I shall grant your request, my friend. God knows you've earned a rest."

Beatrix grinned, sparing not one tooth in her smile as she beamed back at her liege and friend. She bowed out of habit and respect, and with a little more bravado left over from Steiner's and Freya's support, she walked up and gave the younger lady a hug. Garnet returned it and kissed her on both cheeks as a Queen was accustomed to doing.

"I knew something like this was going to happen," she said as she looked up into her guardian's face. "Beatrix, you seem very set upon this decision of yours, so not only will I not stop you, but I shall give you my support and blessing as well."

"And don't think you can leave me out of everything!" said Zidane as he slapped the General's arm. "For shame, you ladies hogging one another while leaving us men out in the cold! I know this is Alexandria, but..."

"Excellency?" said Beatrix.

"Yeah?"

"Do shut up, sire." They both grinned, and Beatrix gave him a hug as well. Zidane knew that

she had been wanting to say that to him for a very long time; perhaps this was the earliest liberty she took as a retired General? In any case, it was heartwarming to see this woman acting so warmly and affectionately, and one couldn't help but think that part of the reason she was like this was because this would be one of the last times she ever saw them.

"I guess, if you're both behind me on this, the only things left for me to do is to make it official, say my goodbyes, and leave the kingdom."

"What do you think you'll do once you're away?" asked Zidane as he let her go. She shrugged and gave him a smile.

"I don't know. I might stop on by Burmecia first and see how they're doing. But to tell you the truth, I'll be doing everything I've always wanted to do, but never had the chance to."

"You deserve it," smiled Garnet sweetly. "But still, there's going to be a big hole in the military without your presence. Major Steiner, unless you plan on accompanying her, you're going to have to pick up a lot of slack." Steiner's face flushed at the mention of leaving the kingdom with Beatrix, and

though he tried to say something, all that came out was muttering and stuttering.

“No, you should stay here, at least until *you* decide to retire,” recommended Beatrix. “No sense in both of us leaving.”

“But, there is also no sense in you going out there all by yourself!” he argued. Beatrix sighed and nodded her head, but ever-loyal Freya stepped in to cover that base.

“I will go with her,” she said. She smiled, looked her friend straight in the eye, and added, “To the very ends of Gaia. Where your home is, there shall be mine as well.”

“You’re not going *anywhere* without me!” hissed Fratley as he put his arms around his wife. He kissed her ear and she giggled, and there seemed to be no way of talking him out of it. Besides, as he mentioned, “I’ve been living so much of my life without you, my dear. May the Creator curse me if I spend another second away from you.”

“That’s so romantic!” cooed Garnet affectionately. She grabbed hold of her husband and cuddled up to him; Zidane, never one to refuse such an action from a pretty young lady, grinned and held

her close. Poor Beatrix rolled her eyes, but at least things looked to be going well. She wanted to leave the kingdom knowing that everything was going to be safe, and with the way things looked now, everything seemed to be looking well.

“Anyway,” she said, interrupting the mushy moments, “I’m going to pack up my things and get into a new change of clothes. This uniform that I have on now is best suited for a General of Alexandria; I am merely a woman now. With your leave, my lord and lady...” She bowed again, and wandered off to her room. Everyone watched her go in silent reverence, and knew that once the woman emerged, she would never be quite the same again.

“Farewell, General,” whispered Zidane as she left. “We’re going to miss having you around.”

Once everybody got the news, they assembled in Alexandria Square. Most everybody was there, gathered together to give the General an official send-off. A replacement for the warrior would have to be found, and speeches would most definitely be made, and the process of saying goodbye would definitely be traumatic for a few people. Zidane and

Garnet were all right with Freya and Fratley leaving—they considered no better a company to follow Beatrix into her new life than they—and a small farewell service had already been planned for them.

Quina shivered.

“Cold, cold, cold!” s/he sang. “Always cold, always cold! Why we have to hold this outside? Much warmer indoors!”

“You just want to go in because that’s where all the food is!” exclaimed Lani. Quina nodded its bulbous head fiercely, unashamed of the truth.

“Yes-yes! Warm fire and warm food are good when saying farewell to friends! I say, we have great feast in honor of Freya and Beatrix! Great feast in honor of Fratley! Great feast in honor of King and Queen!”

“You might as well throw in a ‘great feast for the chef’,” noted Zidane. Quina nodded its head again with equal ferocity.

“Oh, yes-yes indeed! Almost forgot! Must have great feast for chef! No point in doing otherwise!”

“How many feasts does that make?” asked one of the Vivis gathered there. Everyone had lost count of

the number, but Quina did the math and came up with six, one for each individual person.

“Ugh, I’d be stuffed to the gills from so many feasts,” groaned Steiner. “And I don’t even *have* gills!”

“People would think I’d be pregnant already by the time I finished!” agreed Garnet. A few people tried to make other similar jokes, but with the exception of Vivi’s, none of them were particularly funny.

“If I ate that much, I’d blow up like a balloon and float away!” he exclaimed.

“Then we must have one great big gigantic feast, in honor of everybody!” declared Quina. S/he shivered again, and added, “Though still indoors! Too cold to do anything out here! Would rather stay indoors!”

“Hush now,” muttered Steiner. “This is all for Lady Beatrix! She deserves this sending-off party! Remember, this might be the last time any of us sees her, so make sure she feels appreciated!...Though, I believe she does already...” Steiner trailed off and began muttering to himself, while Zidane and Garnet gave each other sweet looks.

“It’s too bad she’s leaving,” said the Queen.

“They’d make a good couple,” said the King.

“Should have been a wedding,” noted Garnet.

“You think he’ll run after her?” asked Zidane.

“No, that would be too romantic. Steiner would just smile and say farewell, or something.”

“Yeah.”

“What is it you speak of?” asked said knight. “I heard my name. Do you need me, my liege?”

“No, not really,” they smiled in unison. He grumbled, scratched his head, and wondered “what that was all about”. Fortunately, for Quina and everybody else, they didn’t have to wait long for the guest of honor to arrive. She came with two of her subordinate soldiers, each one of them leading a horse by the reins. Beatrix had completely disposed of her General’s uniform, from the boots to the sword-belt she had, and now wore wintry clothes consisting of a rose-red sweater and maroon wool leggings, along with a light coat and earmuffs. One of her soldiers was bearing her sword for her, but that was the only thing remaining of her past.

“Sorry to keep everybody waiting,” she said as she arrived. “Ronnie and Bonnie were busy rounding up the horses I asked for. I didn’t figure that I’d want to walk in this cold weather.”

“Thoughtful to the end,” remarked Freya. “Well, we all know why we’re gathered here, so we might as well say our goodbyes or whatever. Bea, whenever you’re ready, Fratty and I will be waiting.” Freya smiled, and took Fratley’s hand as she approached the horses. The two soldiers helped them mount up, then all eyes turned towards Beatrix. Garnet and Steiner, the ones who had known her the longest, had to wonder just what kind of speech she would give.

“...It all happened so fast, didn’t it?” she began with a chuckle. “You know, in the old days, a warrior that returned home after a brilliant campaign was given the honor of a triumph, a tumultuous parade that celebrated the victory. There would be musicians and poets singing about the champion, and revelers throwing flower petals in front of him as his chariot paraded through the town. There would also be animals and treasures brought forth from the foreign land, surrounding and adorning the conqueror. Sometimes, his children would be on the chariot with him, or they would ride ponies out in

front. He would also have the prisoners of the conquered land chained before him, too stunned to even speak. A slave, holding a golden crown, would be at his side, whispering a warning in his ear: a warning, that all glory is fleeting.”

Silence. The snow died down.

“It just happened so fast...” she whispered again. “It happened so fast... so very fast... Life is filled with so many ironies, and strange events that couldn’t happen anywhere else, except in fairy tales. But... I have seen my fair share of miracles, and I have been led into dumb-stricken awe by what these eyes have seen. Oh, yes. I have lived through fire and terror, one of two last survivors of the D’negel attack. I was in a circus once, with performers and actors, and I grew into womanhood under a tent.

“I... met the great master Atma when I was young, and trained under him. I... I even fell in love while I was training under him, and as many loves end, mine ended in tragedy. I... excelled in my teachings, and became a great General for the Alexandrian army. I was Beatrix the undefeated, wielding an unstoppable weapon called Save the Queen. I was at one time a hated enemy, but through a trial by fire and a benediction of chaos, I turned

into a beloved friend. I found love, and people who would die for me, and... I have known happiness, and mercy, and... good friends who would... share... the beauty of life with me....Excuse me for a second!”

The General was crying. She had broken down towards the middle of her speech, and had to pause to regain her senses.

“I’m sorry,” she said after awhile. “I know it’s strange to see me cry... But, I’m human too. I can bleed, and lose battles, and question my position in life. I can yearn for freedom, and be permitted to love, and be permitted to have dear friends. I’m just as human as any of you—well, you know what I mean.” (That last part referred to the Qus, the Burmecians, and any other species around that was not humanoid)

“I can cry too,” she continued. “But anyway, this is it. This really is my last hour here. I am no longer General Beatrix Francine de Alexandria; I am just plain old ordinary Beatrix.....Well, maybe not *old*...”

“Here, here!” shouted Zidane. Most everybody present gave him a strange look, but the only thing Beatrix had to give him was a smile.

“My dear friend, Zidane,” she indicated. “A youth of whom I have had the pleasure of teaching and serving. He is the King of this land, but to me, he is a precious friend—like the little brother I never knew. I love him dearly.” The crowd let out an Awww, and Zidane’s face turned tomato-red. He grinned at her shyly, perhaps the first time he had ever done so, and waved at the crowd as he was suddenly thrust into the spotlight.

“I love all of you,” said Beatrix, looking around to see who had gathered in her honor. She approached Quina first, smiled, and said, “I love Quina, for introducing me to piece’a, and getting me ridiculously hooked! And I love Quina for greeting me so happily after I returned home late after the war against Iudicium. Thank you, Quina.” She gave the Qu a hug, and everybody went Awwwww once again.

“And I love Vivi,” she said, kneeling down to the black mage’s level, “every single one of them. I mean, come on, ladies! How adorable is this guy?”

“Extremely adorable!” shouted one of the gathered kids. Beatrix smiled and agreed. Vivi, on the other hand, was blushing furiously.

“But more noble is his heart, and his courage, for without this little one, I’m afraid this kingdom would be in worse shape than it is right now. You couldn’t ask for a better friend than Vivi. Nor any of the Tantalus thieves, despite their reputation. They are all loyal, more loyal than I can hope to be, and if they were not so rascally, they would make excellent knights.” The members of Tantalus all smiled sheepishly, except for Rubi, who sang out her thanks as always.

“Aw, shucks! I ain’t no knight material! Heck, none’uh these ornery rascals are!...That’s cuz’ we’re too good fer knighthood!”

“Darn right!” chimed Blank. “Here’s to being better than knights!” The members of Tantalus cheered and performed their trademark greeting, and out of habit, Zidane did it too. Beatrix smiled at them, then turned towards the King and Queen she loved so dearly.

“My dear, dear Lieges... I don’t think a measurement exists that will give justice to how much I will miss you, and how much I love you. Even if you could stretch from one end of the universe to the other, it would still fall terribly short.” She gave Zidane a hug first, whispering,

‘Take care of the Queen, Zidane. This is a request from me. You are a good King, and I hope you can forgive me for doubting you. You will make a wonderful father.’ She kissed his forehead, then turned to hug her Queen. “And Garnet,” she said, “take care of the King, for we all know the punk needs all the help he can get.”

“*HEY!!!!*” Naturally, everybody broke out in unrestrained laughter. Even Zidane cracked a smile, scratched his head, and admitted that Beatrix got him good.

“Seriously,” she said, “love each other until you are dead, and when you meet again in the afterlife, love each other anew. I trust you both.” She gave Garnet a kiss, and then went over to Lani, a person who very few people expected her to approach. Beatrix asked one of the soldiers to bring forth her sword, and she commanded Lani to kneel.

“Whoa, waitamminute!” screamed the dark-skinned woman. What’s the big deal here? What’re you gonna do with that sword? “Beatrix gave Lani a” trust me “smile, and held Save the Queen in her hands for the last time as Lani kneeled.

“Since I will be leaving soon,” she began, “I must pass my sword onto another, one whom I can trust to

wield it properly and justly. Unfortunately, since there isn't anyone like that for miles around, I'll just have to let Lani borrow it until then."

"HEY!!!" Again, everybody broke out in laughter, except for poor Lani.

"I'm just kidding, Lani!" exclaimed Beatrix through her laughter. "I'm just kidding! You really have proven yourself, and since you've gotten to be a trusted and loyal member of the kingdom's personal guard, I now place this land in the hands of yourself and Major Steiner. I now give you Save the Queen, Dame Reimilani Hrist Ravenstone, in hopes that you will wield it as well as your predecessor." The crowd let out a small gasp of awe as Save the Queen was handed down to Lani, who took it with quiet reverence. She stood up, received an unexpected hug from Beatrix, and smiled sheepishly. Suddenly, as a few people absorbed what happened, the dam inevitably broke.

"...*Reimilani*? Reimilani Hrist Ravenstone??! Is that your full name?!"

"Lady Beatrix!!! How *could* you?!" screamed poor Lani. "How did you know my full name?! I thought that was confidential!!"

“You know how it is here in Alexandria,” shrugged the former General coolly. “Nothing is secret or sacred.”

“But, but, but...” By this time, nearly everybody was laughing or trying in vain not to laugh, leaving poor Lani so steaming mad that the snow around her actually melted a little.

“SHUT UP!!” she screamed. “So what if that’s my name?! My *father* gave me that name! You gotta problem with that?!”

“No!” snickered everyone, though they tried hard not to. “No! It’s a... it’s a... very... beautiful... name!...HAAA HAHAHAHAHA!!!”

“Ohh, Lady Beatriiiiiiiiiix!!!” Poor Lani pouted and whined, and Beatrix, ever sympathetic, groaned and snapped at everyone to behave themselves. They all straightened up and sobered, and not a trace of a smile was on anyone’s face, save Freya’s and Fratley’s.

“Reimilani Hrist Ravenstone is a very beautiful name, Dame Lani,” he said as he smiled warmly. “It is a name of great grace and beauty. It suits you well. Your father must have been a very noble man.” Lani smiled warmly at the Burmecian, who (for all

records) seemed to be very serious and genuine. She waved at him and gave him an honorable thanks, then dismissed herself from Beatrix's presence. It was later rumored, once the former General left, that Lani could be seen modeling Beatrix's uniform around the kingdom, but nobody could really guarantee that since she was unrecognizable in the garments.

Finally, Beatrix walked towards Steiner, who looked like he didn't know how he was going to say farewell. The two of them had obviously drawn very close in the years since they first met each other, and Beatrix's additional years serving the kingdom had only helped to draw them even closer together. The poor guy fumbled for what to say, and as usual, Beatrix's smile calmed him down. She only had one real thing to say to him, but that was enough.

"I think I'm going to miss you more than anybody, Adelbert." She smiled, then suddenly drew in to kiss him full on the mouth. Everybody's eyes widened in surprise, *especially* Steiner's, and somebody whistled. Another person shouted "It's about time!", and Beatrix released her smooch to give him a loving smile. Poor loveable Steiner was frozen in place, though there was no doubt that he

had enjoyed it. With a satisfied grin, Beatrix turned away and joined her Burmecian friends.

“Lady Beatrix!” called the knight suddenly. She turned around to see what he wanted. “Write me sometime!”

“Don’t push your luck, Bert!” she called back. Steiner chuckled out loud, and raised his sword in a final farewell. The Pluto Knights and the Alexandrian guard did likewise (as did Lani), and everybody smiled warmly as Beatrix hopped up on her horse. For awhile, she took in a few last glimpses of the kingdom, of the land she had lived in and served for so many years, and to friends she had known and loved, and to the sky and the ground, and the smell and the feel...

“Beatrix? Beatrix?” Freya’s voice jarred her thoughts, and with a smile, Beatrix looked back at the kingdom for one last time.

“Just memorizing every detail,” she said. “I don’t know how I’m going to say goodbye.”

“Long farewells never were necessary,” advised Fratley. “Perhaps a revered silence would be the best form of farewell.” Beatrix gave him a smile, and turned to look at Alexandria one last time. She

raised her hand in a final farewell, and stirred her horse to gallop away.

“Okay, let’s go!” And with that, three warriors and friends rose away into the distance, away from one life and into the next. The air was cold and breezy, and a feeling of renewal washed over their bodies and souls as they rode away, off into the sunset together.

How does one best describe the feeling of complete freedom? Or is it even possible? One can try. Lady Beatrix, formerly of Alexandria, swore that she felt as free as the wind as she rode her steed down the snowy plains of the world, across vast landscapes of wild grassy plains and over majestic frozen hills. The snow fell into her face as her ride guided her into the unknown—into the unknown future, into a life and destiny that would be forever hers to mold as she saw fit. She tried to think of a good way to describe how she felt at that moment, and “free” seemed best.

There were no more restraints keeping her anywhere—that was a good way to put it. She had been released of any chains, freed from their

enormous weight upon her limbs. There was not an ever-present eye watching her and willing her to do things—from that day forward, she did as she saw fit. She experienced freedom as her ride guided itself across the plains, and the only thing that led her was her own heart. That, she figured, was what freedom was: letting her heart be her guide and nothing more.

Two faithful friends, the dragoons Fratley and Freya, accompanied her into this new life. They were as dear as heartbeats, refusing to let their beloved ex-General venture into the unknown on her own. Truth be told, Beatrix was actually rather frightened and unsure about leaving the kingdom. She had told Freya on many occasions that she did not take a change well, and *she* had been the one who insisted upon leaving, so one could only imagine how she was feeling now. The cold weather, with the falling snow and the shredding wind, disabled any of the three from conversing amongst themselves for quite awhile.

Freya didn't know where her friend was heading, nor if she ever intended to stop riding. Beatrix had planned up to this very moment, and now that they were all free and a good distance away from the kingdom, Freya had to know if her friend had any destination in mind. They certainly couldn't live out

in the wild, and unless Beatrix had an infinite supply of Tents with her, they would all have to find a place to stay—at least for a few months, until the lady truly decided what she wanted to do with her life.

For the moment, Beatrix seemed content to just ride away, despite how cold it was. The sun was out and bright, giving the world plenty of illumination as it shined down upon the freezing wintry world. There were patches of snow and ice to be seen as the trio galloped down the fields, and they glimmered back a blinding glow as the light touched them. There was not much green in the world, except for a very distant grove of pine trees that stood out like a tiny dot in the horizon. The world was in winter, in sleep—it had earned the sleep, after soaking in so much blood from the previous struggles.

After riding aimlessly for an hour or so, Freya wished to have a talk with her friend. Beatrix didn't seem to know where she was going, and Freya was okay with the mass amounts of freedom she was now experiencing, but they needed a place to aim for. It was cold and the dragoons' furry coverings would only last so long; Beatrix had on a heavy coat, but even she would freeze eventually. Since neither dragoon wanted to remain out in the cold for very long, they both decided to ask Beatrix where

they were headed. Freya had to guide her steed over and intercept her friend in order to gain her attention.

“Sorry,” she apologized, “but we need to have a talk. Now all this riding is well and good, but do you have anywhere in mind, Trixie-dear? Or are we just going to ride until our tails freeze?” Beatrix gave her longtime friend an empty gaze, almost as if she had never considered a destination.

“I, uh, well, ummm...”

“You *did* have somewhere in mind where you wanted to go?” asked Freya. Beatrix frowned and genuinely gave it a thought. “...No? Don’t tell me that—”

“Actually,” interrupted the older woman, “now that you mention it, I think I said that I wanted to go to Burmecia. Not to live in, just... to check up on the place. I want to see how it’s improved since I liberated it. But if either one of you object to it...”

“I’ve got no problems,” said Freya with a shrug. “I’ve learned to put the past behind me. If you want to sojourn to Burmecia, then it is there that we shall head. Any objections, Fratty?” The only male of the group paused and gave it a thought.

“No, none. As a matter of fact, I’ve always had this burning desire to go return to the old kingdom. I haven’t been there since that awful attack, but it seems like a lifetime ago. I’d... love to see it again...” Freya smiled at her husband, gave Beatrix a nod, and since she knew the way best, she led the entourage towards the city of eternal rain—or, in this case, eternal snow.

The trip through Gizamaluke’s Grotto was a bit painful for Freya. Even now, so many ages after her disastrous visit there, she still bore memories of many of her friends being killed as the heartless black mages stormed through the area. Burmecia, and Cleyra after it, had both been used as mere stepping-stools for Brahne’s evil campaign. Beatrix had been part of that campaign once, and she shuddered as well as images of innocent people being slaughtered entered her mind.

She had been responsible for many of those deaths... So many of those deaths... The lady would have broken down and shed quiet tears if she didn’t receive hands of support from one of her two friends.

“Are you all right?” asked Fratley as he gave her a smile. Beatrix visibly shivered, and shook her

head. Poor Fratley had not been subjected to the horrors of the long-gone campaign, and thus he was largely unaware of Beatrix's involvement. He had been told bits and pieces from the two ladies and a few others, but some thought that it was best he was left in the dark.

"...I can't help but feel terrible for what I did," she whispered. Fratley kept his smile and patted her shoulders.

"But that was an ancient sin committed by a woman General named Beatrix de Alexandria. You are neither a criminal nor a General, nor even a resident of Alexandria. You are simply Beatrix, our dear friend, who we both love quite well." The woman gave her one-time rival a warm smile, and thanked him for his support. Suddenly, as the trio wandered through the caverns, she stopped herself as a thought came to mind.

"You know," she said, "now that I'm not living in Alexandria anymore, I really *can't* be called *de Alexandria* now, can I?"

"It seems like another freedom that you've been given," remarked Freya. "you're right. You really can't have that name anymore. Do you remember your family's name?"

“Not for the life of me,” grunted the former knight. “I think it started with a B, or maybe it was a D... No, I can’t remember my family’s name. Freya, that was almost twenty-five years ago! I can’t remember that far back!” She let out a sigh, and rested on a nearby crate that had been left over from the black mage invasion. Freya remained standing, and pondered over the infernal situation. Beatrix was freed, no longer a citizen of Alexandria. She needed a new identity to completely start her new life, but what could she be called...?

“...I have an idea,” said Fratley after a pause. He looked back and forth between the two women and smiled. “The two of you say you are like sisters, right?”

“...Yes...”

“Then you can simply call yourself ‘Lady Beatrix Francine Crescent’, and be adopted into Freya’s family as her ‘sister’. What do you think? Do you like it?” Beatrix couldn’t help but smile broadly as Fratley made the suggestion, and a look from Freya’s emerald eyes told the lady that it would be a very sentimental gesture.

“Could I do that?” she asked. Fratley gave her a shrug.

“I don’t see why not. Do you have any other options?” Beatrix did not, and so she smiled and approached the woman she considered a sister.

“It sounds a bit odd,” remarked the Burmecian woman, “but I like it. But next thing you’ll have us doing is having ‘family reunions’ and all the other confusion of nieces and nephews. What do you think would happen if any future children of mine, or yours, asks why their auntie looks different from them?”

“We’ll just tell them the truth!” exclaimed Beatrix with a smile. ‘Now are you going to adopt me into your family or not?’ Freya gave her oldest friend a loving smile, and used her spear to cut a thin slice in her palm. Beatrix did the same, and the two sealed their new “union” with a blood pact.

“Of course,” replied Freya with a smile of her own. Their hands clasped for a good while, letting the blood mix and churn until it had passed through their palms. They then gave each other a hug—and later, once they reached the pool of Gizamaluke, there was much washing and scrubbing and healing of the cuts.

“You are now Beatrix Crescent,” noted Freya wryly as she cleaned her wound. “How does it feel?”

Beatrix grinned, and laughed out loud as she washed her own hand.

“Pretty good, actually. I never thought that you and I would be real sisters,” she remarked. Looking over at an amused Fratley, she added, “I guess that makes you my brother-in-law.”

“I guess it does,” he shrugged.

The world that awaited the trio once they stepped outside of the Grotto was one of unimaginable wonder. There was a magnificent chain of mighty mountains that greeted them first, each one was tall and proud and shining as a sentinel. Their snowy peaks sang out to them; their blue foothills quivered in the soft chilly breeze. The clouds above were a gorgeous silvery color, with painted streaks of blue and gold etched in to make the scene heavenly. A thousand shafts of light, some so bright and wide that they might have been indicating some spectacular miracle, poked out from behind the clouds to shine down upon the cold day. The grass beneath them, full and rich and impervious to the cold of winter, waved fiercely as the wind picked up, and where there was no mountains to obscure the

view, the hills and plains rolled on forever until they were lost in the distance.

Both Freya and Fratley took a deep, relieved breath—not only because they were leaving the dank caves of Gizamaluke, but also because they were now in the place where they had been born—and because the scenery was just so breathtaking. The sky, especially, was a sight to behold, exploding into rich colors of clouds and lights. Beatrix smiled as they drank in the day, and the trio rested from their travels for a few minutes before continuing.

They passed a Qu marsh, and fond memories of Dr. Quban entered into Beatrix's mind. She recalled being saved by the kind Qu some time ago, after her one-woman liberation of Burmecia. That battle had been one of her hardest, and she had desperately needed the skills of a talented doctor to heal her up. Dr. Quban was not the world's best, but for a Qu, s/he was quite talented. Freya and Fratley were not so intimately-involved with the bloated being, and passed by the marsh wondering why Beatrix looked so bright. They just figured it was relief at being so free.

After the marsh, the three came upon the boundaries of Burmecia, the city that had suffered

through one war right after the other. Freya and Fratley had been the last two dragoons that defended that kingdom from invaders, and both had nearly died in the effort (Fratley practically did perish, though once again, it was Dr. Quban who saved him). The city still looked to be in ruins, although the everlasting rain (or snow, in this case) had covered the city in a beautiful blanket of white, making it look less haunting.

Freya and Fratley paused, and stared at the kingdom where they had spent their lives.

“You don’t have to come,” said Beatrix gently. “I really just wanted to stop on by here briefly, and see how it was holding up. I really won’t even be gone that long—maybe half an hour. You two can find somewhere to rest if you need to.”

“No, that won’t be necessary,” said Freya quietly. “I’m willing to go back one last time. But by God, it’s haunting! Burmecia... has changed so much since the days of my youth! I remember when it was a sprawling city, filled with my kin! I could look up and see the rain soak my face from the sky, and I remembered leaving it to search for Fratley. Hahaha... it seems that every time I try to come back, I’m always pushed away.”

“But you also said that this place was not your true home,” noted Beatrix. Freya smiled and nodded her head, and quietly led the way into the snowy city. Fratley followed, his own face aghast at what he was seeing. Beatrix tried to remain as stoic as possible, but even she was amazed at how much the place had changed.

The funny thing was, though, the place had changed for the *better*.

Burmecia had almost completely changed since any of the three companions had last seen it. Beatrix and Freya remembered it to be a city in ruins, and Fratley swore it was hardly ever lively, but as they looked at the city, their beliefs were questioned. Dozens, perhaps hundreds of humanoid rats and mice were scurrying around the city, performing a million jobs and working feverishly to restore the city to its former glory. There were people operating primitive cranes and levies; people carved wood and stone, or recycled the ruined pieces into smaller uses. There were carpenters fixing houses, janitors cleaning up the messes, shovelers clearing out the snow, cooks feeding the workers, organizers directing the mayhem, and contractors raising roofs and building houses.

It was chaos, beautiful chaos, and for the longest time, not one of the three knew what to say. They each shed a tear that froze as it fell to the ground, too happy to speak.

“How did this happen?” squeaked Freya. “I... I thought... The small refugees, and Fratley and I, were the last of our kind... But, how...”

“I guess we were wrong,” assumed Beatrix. “The sheer number of people here is staggering! I don’t think there were half this many when Brahne and I invaded! I have to admit, I don’t know how this is possible!” Standing out in the entrance of the city, the three friends gaped at the activity for a good while before Fratley got an idea.

“Let’s have a look around,” he suggested. “Maybe we can inquire about all this to somebody in charge.” The ladies agreed, and the three of them entered into Burmecia, plodding through snow and being greeted by their enthusiastic kin. Beatrix saw quite a bit of humans in the mix, as well as a few other species, like the Qu and the humanoid owl (in which category Dr. Tot belonged in), and let out an especially broad smile as she recognized one particular human woman in the mix.

Slowly, Beatrix approached her and the Burmecian male she worked alongside with. The girl was moderately tall and somewhat lean, and had long honey-gold hair flowing down her back. She had on a heavy winter coat and white earmuffs, but there was no mistaking the woman once she turned her back. With the telltale dark glasses and the ever-present walking stick, Beatrix could recognize her instantly.

“Why, if it isn’t lady Cassandra!” she exclaimed. The blonde woman turned to face the former General and gave the woman a beautiful bright smile. Indeed, it was Cassandra, the mysterious young blind woman who had arrived in Alexandria to foretell of the invasion by Vikar Iudicium. With her was her ever-present aide Morris, and a few others Beatrix didn’t know.

“Lady Beatrix!” exclaimed Cassandra, and she leaned forward to give the elder lady a hug. Beatrix returned it gladly and, even though the other woman would not see it, she gave her a smile.

“My dear lady Cassandra! What in the world are you doing here? You vanished from the kingdom so suddenly that I was afraid that something bad happened to you!”

“Oh, I’m sorry to worry you!” exclaimed Cassandra, keeping that bright smile on her face. “I really just felt like I overstayed my welcome in Alexandria, so I went with Morris and a few others to rebuild Burmecia! I knew that after all the fighting was over, there would be a need for people to rebuild what was lost, and..... guess who volunteered!!” Beatrix’s smile increased, but she had a reason to. Cassandra hardly ever seemed jovial or bright during her stay in the kingdom, and to see her acting so chipper and upbeat was a welcome sign.

“So that’s what happened...” Beatrix gave the young lady a smile, and let out an involuntary shiver. Cassandra sensed it, smiled, and apologized for keeping them outside.

“I’m such a fool... Morris, would you please lead us all inside? I think we’re all ready for a break anyway. The fire will do us all good.”

“I agree,” said the young Burmecian, and he eagerly led Cassandra, Beatrix, Freya, and Fratley inside the nearest building. A great roaring fire warmed the bodies of several other workers who had come in from the cold, and Morris dismissed them all as he came bounding in.

“Away with ye, lazy rats!” he shouted. “You’ve been in here long enough! Break time’s over! Go help Shotel shovel the snow!” The older workers grumbled, but left the party of five to their privacy and left the building. Morris gave them a smile and offered seats, and Cassandra thanked him for his dutiful work. Freya and Fratley both took a good look at the young man, and inquired about him.

“As you might know, this is the young man who was assigned to be my aide,” said Cassandra as she made introductions. “His name is Morrison Daily Feena, an orphan of the struggle against Brahne. He and I met when I was..... well... let us say, when I was ‘lost’ in the world, and we have been together ever since. Lady Beatrix, Lady Freya, I don’t know who this third person is. Would I know him?”

“Perhaps,” replied Fratley. “I am Fratley Irontail, a former dragoon serving under the King of this land. I am Freya’s husband, and as of late, I have become Beatrix’s brother-in-law.”

“Brother-in-law?” mimed Cassandra in confusion. “But... I was told that Freya was Burmecian, and Beatrix an Alexandrian! How can they be sisters...?”

“It’s a long story,” replied Freya with a smile. “Just accept that we’re family now.”

“I see...” Cassandra paused, and carefully reached over to grab a cup of hot cocoa that had been placed on a nearby table. She drank carefully, and placed the cup back after a moment. “Burmechia has suffered many scars,” she continued in a more serious voice—the one that Beatrix had gotten used to hearing. “I can feel the torment of those slain in the past. There have been many enemies of this land... but... I sense that many of them are no longer walking the earth. For that, I am thankful.

“This town deserves peace and health and good years, just as any other town that has suffered through war. It is a blessing that I cannot look upon such terrors, and a curse that I may never be able to see the joy that has been pulled out from the ashes. I feel.....” The young lady paused, shifted in her seat, and smiled. A look of relief washed over her face, and she continued.

“...I feel as if I can finally rest here,” she said gently. “I have found purpose in rebuilding Burmechia. There is much a woman like myself can do, even with this blindness, and as long as I have

purpose and I am at peace, then I can ask for nothing else.”

“Finding purpose.....” Freya muttered out the statement, paused, thought, and muttered out a second. “...And being at peace...”

“It is all I need to be happy,” replied Cassandra with a gentle smile. She suddenly blushed, grinned, and looked over in Morris’ direction. She didn’t have her dark glasses on, so her golden eyes shined warmly. “Morris and I... well... you could say that we are more than good friends now...” Fratley tried for a smile, but until the young Burmecian elaborated, he didn’t know what they meant.

“I proposed to her a month ago,” said Morris sheepishly as his hand went to Cassandra’s. “She accepted quite gladly. A human/Burmecian marriage is slightly rare, but these days, it’s becoming a little more common. But I don’t care; I want to be with Cassandra for the rest of my days, helping her out and loving her as much as I am able. She deserves it all.” The blonde grinned in embarrassment, and tried to squeal her way out of being in the spotlight. Fratley, however, just plain grinned.

“Well then, congratulations for you both. But tell me, Lady Cassie, what sort of connection did you

have in Alexandria? I'm afraid I never got a chance to communicate with you."

"That's right," she agreed. "Well, to put it simply, I... uhh... 'predicted' a few future outcomes for the kingdom. I was a kind of soothsayer, I guess you could say, and I suppose it was my visions that helped the kingdom endure through the battles with Iudicium. Oh, speaking of which, how is the Queen? I have not received word about the results of the fight, and I'm afraid my psychic powers don't tell me all." Beatrix and Freya paused nervously, but told the young woman the kingdom's fate.

"...Queen Garnet has recovered from her mutilation," reported Beatrix. "She seemed to be faring well the last time I checked. She was also expecting to have a baby in nine or so months, so I would guess that her health has returned."

"I see."

"The entire kingdom is peaceful and happy again," said Freya. "There is no cause to worry. Why else do you think the three of us are here now?" Cassandra grinned, chuckled a little, and nodded her head.

“Right, right, I see. You..... wanted to be freed from your old life, but you couldn’t do it while you still had obligations. I see...” The young woman trailed off and didn’t talk for awhile, which she was prone to do. If anyone had a good reason to sit down and think, it would have been Cassandra.

“...Tell me something,” said Fratley, breaking the silence. “How is it that so many of my fellow people have assembled here? I thought that the last of them died out in the latest invasion.”

“There were many refugees that fled after Brahne attacked,” explained Cassandra. “And many more who did not even live in either city. I would estimate that yes, probably half the population of your people is gone, but the other half remains, having been elsewhere when the holocausts occurred. I wish there was a more miraculous way of explaining it, but there’s not.”

“And you have to remember,” noted Morris, “we Burmecians and Cleyrans can produce very quickly. Our gestation period is not nearly as long as a human’s, so we’d be able to replace all who fell in a matter of a year, at the most.”

“(It’s a wonder you haven’t overrun the planet, then,)” murmured Beatrix to herself. Cassandra

looked over at her and gave her a look.

“Hm? What’s that?”

“...Nothing, dear,” smiled the ex-General. “Just wind. Don’t mind it.” Cassandra slowly nodded her head, finished her cocoa, and asked if there was anything else she could do for the wandering trio.

“As long as this city is being loved, populated, and cherished, then nothing else will make me happy,” responded Freya. “If Burmecia is in peace, then I am content.”

“Then you will be returning to your homeland?”

“No, I’m sorry. Our destination is elsewhere. We merely stopped here first because we wanted to see it one last time. Well, maybe not *last*. Now that you’re here, helping rebuild the place, I’m sure you’ll see more of us.”

“I’d like that,” said Cassandra with a smile. Fratley gave her a smile and a salute before standing.

“And who knows?” he said. “We may come and visit you if the two of you ever have kids!”

“Fratley!” The loveable dragoon chuckled and grinned, first kissing Freya then giving Beatrix an

innocent, gregarious stare. She sighed at him, very much tempted to slug him for his comment, and excused herself from the room.

“We really must be going now,” she said as she bowed to the blonde. “Though I don’t know where, I’m sure I’ll find something.”

“Perhaps I can be of some help,” offered Cassandra. The three travelers became silent and paid her their attention. “You see, before I moved into this city, I lived in a small wooden cottage a few miles away. It should still have a few furnishings left over. It’s near Lindblum, somewhere after you leave the Grotto, and it will have a red roof on it. Do you need a guide there?” Beatrix smiled, and mentally tried to write down the location of the cottage.

“I think we can find it. It’s not *that* cold out there. But are you sure it’s all right if we take it?”

“I sure won’t need it,” said Cassandra with a grin. Morris smiled as well, knowing what she meant to a good extent, and gave them permission to use the cottage. Freya, Beatrix, and Fratley all gave their generous hostess a warm smile, thanked her for her hospitality, and bade her a very fond (and hopefully very temporary) farewell. Cassandra smiled all the

way as they left, and let out a sigh as she placed her empty gaze upon her fiancé.

“Whew!”

“Tired, milady?”

“No... Just... glad to see that I am not the only one who is happy.”

“I see. Come on, let’s get back to work. Burmecia won’t build itself.” She grinned, and eagerly joined him in recreating the magnificent city of eternal rain—and snow.

The three friends wisely rented a trio of chocobos that would take them back to the Grotto, once they refreshed themselves and packed up some food. The return journey was much more enjoyable, but not a degree warmer outside. The weather was still a freezing one, with plenty of snow that fell even as they all sprinted away from the city. Leaving Burmecia behind no longer felt so depressing and melancholy. With a trusted ally like Cassandra watching over the place, the once-proud city would find itself thriving again. For that, Freya and Fratley were happy.

After clearing the Grotto, the trio on chocobos looked around for the cottage that Cassandra had mentioned. Something with a red roof on it would have stood out very well in a world full of white, and after an hour of riding around searching for the place, Freya and Fratley found it nestled next to a frozen river. The door was locked, of course, but Beatrix had been given the key, and in no time at all, the three friends released their chocobos and entered into their new home.

Surprisingly, Cassandra had kept most of the place well-furnished. Freya later theorized that it had been the girl's psychic powers that told her to keep the place livable, for just such an occasion, so it was a very welcome sight to come into a house with furniture and decorations still around. The inside of the cottage was very quaint and lovable, and the three instantly found themselves liking it.

When they came into a door, they could see a stone chimney in the right side of the room, and a furnace just waiting for a few logs to burn. A tiny stack of firewood, slightly old but still flammable, rested quietly at the side of the chimney, so Fratley volunteered to stoke a fire. There was also a nice velvet rug on the wooden floor, and a great big comfortable chair that could almost fit two. A room

that led into the small kitchen could be seen from the door, and to the far right was a hallway that must've led to the bedrooms.

“It’s such a nice place!” exclaimed Freya with a grin. “I really feel at home here. Fratty, dear, let me help you with that. Bea, would you be precious and start a meal, please? You made us such an excellent pancake breakfast that one time that I simply *must* try out anything else you may have.” Beatrix agreed, and the three of them began their new lives together, inside that little cottage, with only each other to rely upon. They had set out into the world together, and they would face the remnants of their life together.

Night, however, was another story.

There were two bedrooms, and they were right next to each other, which might have been good in some situation. The walls were sturdy and thick but certainly not soundproof, and as Freya and Fratley retired for the night, Beatrix gave them both a stern gaze.

“I’m very tired, my friends,” she sighed. “I’d really like to get a full night’s rest, if I can. Now I don’t mind if you play around a little and start to get intimate, but please try not to make too much noise when you’re lovemaking.”

“Who makes noise?!” wailed Freya. Beatrix gave her friend an irritated look.

“When I stayed over at your house, I could hear you two ‘doing it’. It kept me up for hours on end. Don’t you realize how loud you can get?”

“Why, I never!!” exclaimed Freya in a shocked voice. “Oh, Trixie, don’t be such a big baby! Look, I’m sorry if I ever kept you up, but we hardly make any noise at all!” Beatrix, knowing better than that, gave her friend a dead-tired look.

“...Uh huh. Anyway, please *try* to keep it down. Please?” Freya gave her a reassuring smile, and placed her hand on her friend’s shoulder.

“All right, all right. You know, you’re welcome to join us.” A pause.

“*Get in that room!!*” Beatrix shoved poor dear sweet Freya inside, slammed the door, and prayed to the Almighty Creator that she would be given at least a *few* hours of sleep.

It was going to be a long rest of her life.

And so, the days turned into weeks, and the weeks turned into the months. The seasons changed, first enduring the bitter cold of winter before the awakening breath of spring could ever spread across the land. With the new birth of life spreading across the land, things began to look fresh and peaceful and beautiful once again. Spring grew warmer and warmer, until so much time had passed that it began to resemble summer in its first whispers.

The memory of Beatrix, Freya, and Fratley was still on the minds of the people they had known—after all, it is hard to forget a good friend—but while their absence left a small hole in the kingdom, and while they were all missed very much, life just seemed to go on as it always did, even as more than half a year passed by. Things began to resemble normalcy, months after the last war scarred the kingdom. It was nearly healed up completely, with a new populace to replace the old, and new friends to take the position of long-lost comrades.

Zidane and Garnet finally had their child, a young son they named Alex. The young boy was a treasure of the kingdom, one whom people like Steiner, Lani, and Vivi were beginning to like. But as the King and Queen were being swamped by papers and duties, a sitter had to be found for the

young boy, so Eiko was called back to the kingdom and was hired to be the boy's nanny. She filled the position well... from time to time.

As for the Vivi army, they continued to live and play in the kingdom without any more cares or worries or thoughts of dread at all. They did not have the troubles that their predecessor had, and were always a bright spot on the kingdom, even as one or two of them “stopped” every so often. Quina, on the other hand, became rich when s/he mass marketed the piece'a to the countries all over the world, and had to hire several chefs in order to meet the worldwide demand.

Dame Lani, now a full-fledged guardian of the king and queen, was still chasing after Blank, and Blank was still trying to run away from the zealous woman. However, the months had shifted Lani from a selfish woman with a loud mouth into a more mature, debonair, sophisticated lady. People predicted that there might come a time when she and Blank would truly get together—or, at best, Lani would find some other poor soul to hook up with—but until that time came, if ever it did, she would be a reliable and formidable force.

Speaking of Tantalus, the group actually became legitimate (to the shock of hundreds) and turned its business from thieving to adventuring and exploration. They donated their skills to the high and might of the world—for a price, of course—and instead of robbing from the rich, they ended up robbing from long-lost temples and civilizations. Cinna, Marcus, Blank, Rubi, Benero, Genero, and Baku spread their talent across the globe, and enlisted literally dozens of others into their group, until it became so large that its original members attained legendary status. However, they all still loved to act.

Every night, if the moon wore a pendant out over the shores of the kingdom, Steiner would continually think of Beatrix, and the lasting gifts that she had given him. He would let out at least one forlorn sigh, but at least he no longer had any more regrets. He had told her the way he felt, thus leaving his heart light and relieved. He would always patrol the kingdom by himself, hoping in futility that one day, the woman he secretly loved would return, and they would be together once again. He could always hope.

Alexandria Kingdom was a prosperous place, a place where people could go to be happy and

healthy. It was a place where people could live without troubles, safely protected by the honorable knights that guarded the place. They would have Steiner and Lani to watch over them, as well as Tantalus and the ever-vigilant eyes of the King and Queen—and though it was no guarantee, they might have had the eyes of a certain crimson-haired mercenary who could be seen wandering around Treno every once in awhile.

The food was good because the chef had experienced the taste of the world, and the medical aspects could shine with Doctors Tot and Quban patrolling around. The place was secure and clean thanks to the knights, but it was also a fun place to be with because of the children and the carefree Vivi army. It was a wonderful place to be in, during one of the most wonderful times in history. Beatrix, Freya, and Fratley had left the kingdom in good hands. Though some still lamented their loss, everyone believed that things had worked out for the best.

Humming a happy tune to herself, Eiko Carol bounced a ball towards young Alex Alexandros. The baby boy caught it and sucked on the rubber ball,

drooling all over it like a puppy would. Eiko smiled and scooted closer so she could wrestle it away, and cringed slightly at the saliva painted all over it. Luckily, her handy-dandy handkerchief could clean the mess up.

“Is Alex hungry?” she cooed. “Does Alex want some milk?” The baby smiled at her innocently, its brown eyes sparkling with the infinite naïveté of an infant, and gurgled something out. The young child greatly resembled his mother, from the dark wisp of hair that barely clung to his bald head, and the soft brown eyes he had, right down to the smile on his face. He was going to make a lot of women swoon when he grew up, but for now, Eiko was the one he loved the most. Garnet herself loved taking care of her son, whenever she was not working, and Zidane made a surprisingly good father.

“You want some food?” asked Eiko as she hoisted the baby upon her shoulders. “Okay... I’ll go see if Quina has anything. You just hang on, okay?” The baby smiled and giggled as she skipped towards the kitchen with it riding on her like she was a chocobo. Inside the kitchen, Quina was busy making more piece’as, some with toppings so bizarre that only Steiner could come up with them.

Silently, Eiko tugged on Quina's shirt and gained the Qu's attention.

"Yo, Quina!" she shouted. "Little Al's hungry! Ya got anything for him to chow on?"

"What I look like, food dispenser?" boomed Quina as s/he turned around. The Qu hopped in the air, making Alex laugh at the funny action. "I not have much food! I hungry too, but I never take my own food! Go look someplace else!"

"But this is a kitchen!" spat Eiko in disbelief. "Where *else* am I supposed to find some food? If I can't find something to eat in a *kitchen*, then there's something really wrong going on around here!"

"I know, I know..." sighed Quina. "But we only have supplies for piece'a here. Look elsewhere. Maybe you find bottle of milk or applesauce."

"Kay'." Eiko nodded her head and trotted along through the kitchen until she found the room that was keeping bottles of warm milk for Alex. With a declaration of "Aha!", she plucked one from the shelf and began to feed the baby. Alex sucked the bottle dry, amazing Eiko somewhat.

"Wow! Jeez, kid! You sure do take after your father!" Eiko grinned at the baby as it drank, and

delicately caressed its soft face with her hand. She loved the kid a lot, and found it a pleasure to be his nanny. Madain Sari was guarded by the moogles and a few knights of Lindblum, so she could spend as much time in the kingdom as she needed. Eiko had little use for money, and since she loved taking care of and playing with little Alex, she did it all for free.

After feeding the kid, she carried him back up to his room, since his activities were slowing down. It was around his naptime, and she was getting a bit tired herself. After briefly stopping to burp him, she hoisted the baby up the stairs that led to his room, and gently carried him inside. Slowly, she placed the baby in the cradle, but the second he was set down, his sparkling eyes opened once again and he smiled.

“Oh, poo!” she cursed. “Awake again? What’s it take to get you to sleep??”

“Ba ba!” replied Alex. Eiko blew some air out, flipping her long bluish bangs aside, and turned around in search of a toy. She plucked a cute stuffed chocobo from the floor and gave it to the young prince.

“You wanna sleep with Boco?” she asked. The baby brandished poor stuffed Boco around

mindlessly, slamming it up against the crib more than a few times.

“Bo bo! Mo mo ma ma mo ba bo!”

“Well at least you make more sense than most of these people around here,” she murmured. Sighing again, Eiko went in search for a few more dolls, and presented them to the baby (some of which Zidane had owned—and still technically owned even now). She gave a cactrot, a moogle, an onion knight, a Cait Sith, a Moomba, and a pupu doll to the baby, who was by now nearly suffocated with adorable plushies. The baby mumbled something from behind the mound, and Eiko giggled as she removed some of the toys.

“Sorry,” she smiled. “You wanna sleep with them all?” The baby made a sound which Eiko interpreted as a yes, and so she covered the child with another blanket though the weather was now warm. She then plucked out a short storybook, and began to read it to the young sprout.

“Once upon a time, Boco was out walking along the road. It was a sunny day, and everything was looking very nice. Suddenly, he accidentally bumped into a cute little moogle that had been sitting on the road! “Oh, I’m sorry I bumped into you,” said Boco.

‘Are you hurt?’ “Yes,” replied the moogle in a squeaky voice, “but you didn’t hurt me. I stubbed my toe while I was skipping across the trail, and I was trying to make it better when you came along.”

“” “Gosh, that sounds awful!” exclaimed Boco. ‘Do you want to ride on my back? I can take you to see Dr. Cactrot. He will make you feel better!’ The moogle liked this idea, and so he jumped on Boco and rode him all the way to Dr. Cactrot’s house in the country. When Boco and the moogle got there, they both knocked on the door, and the doctor let them inside...”

Eiko quietly stopped reading, and smiled lovingly as she saw baby Alex asleep. With a quiet kiss, she bade him goodnight and crept out of the room. Once she felt she was a good distance away, she let out a sigh of great relief.

“Whew! That kid’s a handful! But he sure is cute! I’ll bet he’s gonna become a real lady-killer like his old man!” With a smile, the perpetually-perky Eiko strolled away from the baby’s room and back into her own, for a few well-deserved moments of rest.

Steiner had seen the whole thing, and couldn't help but smile at how close Eiko was with the little baby. He let out another one of his forlorn sighs, and turned back to attend to his duties. He had somehow continued to go on without Beatrix—after all, the kingdom was one of his loves—but he did not think he would be able to find anyone else who could know him and care for him just as much as she did. He was at least glad that he had admitted his feelings for her, and she had done the same to him, so there really was not much to be sad about.

Except..... he *missed* her.

“Oh well,” he sighed to himself as he lumbered off to the town. “Things like this happen. I’m sure everything will work out all right in the end.” He sniffled, and stepped onto the boat as it made its regular journey from castle to town. Poor Steiner thought of Beatrix more than he should have, but nobody blamed the armored guy. His Pluto Knights were fanatical about the pairing, and sometimes went to great lengths to see the two of them alone somewhere (Steiner still vaguely remembered the time when they all spied on him). At first glance, the coupling was a strange one, but that was because only a few people knew just how connected the two knights were.

With thoughts of Beatrix still tickling his mind—and thoughts of piece’a tickling his nose—Steiner marched into the kingdom for his usual inspection. There was very little use for a soldier like him in a peaceful world, but if he felt that things were truly quiet, he would have retired as well and probably would have joined Beatrix in freedom and isolation. But he felt he still had a job to do, so he went into the town and had a look around.

Alexandria Town was as peaceful as towns got. It didn’t matter that the last war had ended almost a year ago; it was still a thriving, active town, with little or no malice to stain its name. Steiner got lost in the crowds as he stood there a head above everybody else, and crossed his arms impatiently. There didn’t seem to be any crimes going on, or any disturbances, or any thieves—or for that matter, any *thing*. The day was good and pure, with people crowding the streets as always. Even during market hours, things were good and reasonably calm, and Steiner muttered to himself as he realized that he would not find anything amiss.

Somehow, the big guy managed to squeeze through the crowds, even with his bulky armor on. He wanted to check up with the gate guards, and then he would patrol around the entire town a few

times before returning to the castle for lunch. His days were banal with routines, but it was the life he loved. When he came to the gate, however, something very out of the ordinary was there to greet him.

Ronnie and Clarice, the gate guards, stood at attention as Steiner approached them. In between the two women was a tall man, an imposing sucker who even dwarfed Steiner. He was a muscular and slick dude, coming in from the plains like the wind, and leaving just as quickly and quietly as he had entered. He had pale-blue skin, and a huge shaggy mop of red hair that surrounded his head. Steiner recognized him instantly, even though he had not seen the man in some time. With his arms crossed, Steiner let out a huff and addressed the man known as Amarant Coral.

“I should have known it was you,” he stated. “You just can’t seem to stay away from this kingdom! So, what breeze blew you in here today?”

“The breeze that blows quietest, and strikes swiftest,” answered Amarant as he crossed his arms. Steiner grumbled and asked him once again, this time hugging the hilt of his sword with his fingers.

“Make some sense, won’t you? As I recall, you don’t usually come here nowadays unless there’s some crisis going on!”

“Yup.” Silence.

“But there couldn’t possibly be anything going on now!” insisted Steiner with a shake of his hands. “This land has been peaceful for almost a year now!”

“Not a long time, is it?” asked the former assassin. “Heh... I know something you don’t.”

“Well, isn’t that always the case!” retorted Steiner. “Listen, you! You had better tell me what is going on, or else I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” snorted Amarant as he leaned up against the gate. “Gonna kill me, or arrest me? Oh *no*, I’d better look out. Hey, tin man, if you do anything rash, your king and queen won’t be able to hear what I have to say.”

“They will if you tell me!” he replied. “Now *please*—tell me why you are here. I doubt it is a social call.”

“You really want to know?” asked Amarant lazily. Poor Steiner nearly had a spasm as he heard

the brash remark.

“Why you—! If I—! Ick! It! I!.....Of course, you imbecile!! What kind of a fool do you take me for?” Amarant paused, and gazed down at Steiner coolly as a smile threatened to ruin his tough mystique.

“Now you don’t *really* want me to answer that question, do you?”

“Why you—”

“Just answer the poor man, red,” sighed Lani, who had somehow been within eavesdropping range the whole time. “Steiner’s got it bad enough. His sweet honey of a General left him all alone, so it’s no wonder he’s moody. Go easy on the poor guy, will ya?” Lani turned her head and gazed at her former ally softly, like it was a whole other person behind those eyes and not the rabid woman of yore. Amarant shifted uncomfortably, and drew in a deep breath as he apologized.

“Well, all right. Sorry, Sir Rust-A-Lot. You just make it too easy for me to have fun with you. But if you want the message, I guess I can give it to you.”

“Thank you!” exclaimed Steiner. “Now, if you please...?”

“Right, right... Okay, brace yourself, here it comes...” Amarant paused for dramatic effect, and told Steiner and Lani the information he knew.

“Not again!!”

“Fraid’ so,” shrugged Amarant. Queen Garnet shook her head, her prosthetic mechanical left hand barely clutching onto her weary brow. She was tired enough as it was; she didn’t need this new information.

“...You’re sure of this?” she asked. Amarant crossed his arms and nodded his head.

“Yup. Pretty sure...”

“Another stupid enemy that thinks they can invade the kingdom...” Zidane growled, and matched his wife’s look perfectly as he boiled with aggravation. “This is getting annoying! Can’t these enemies *ever* give us a rest??”

“Apparently not,” answered Steiner darkly. “I have to wonder where you got that information, though. A large enemy force, heading straight for Alexandria on two fronts? Where might you attain such knowledge, from that Hunter friend of yours?”

Or Regent Cid? Perhaps that young psychic told you?”

“Nah, it’s none’a them,” answered the flaming one. “I got it from Treno. Let’s just say that there’s a good deal of big-mouthed people in that city. Anyway, I figured that I should tell you... cuz’, well, I’d have one less employer if I didn’t. It’s not like I care if you get destroyed or not, but it’s bad business to let any kingdom suffer...”

“I’m so glad you think so highly of us,” grumbled Garnet, her voice soaking wet with sarcasm. She sighed, wearily. “...Anyway, I guess we should call a fighting force. Everybody knows the drill by now. Salamander, how much would you accept to stay behind and fight?”

“I need 100 Gil for an airship ride back to Treno, and another hundred for a few meals. Throw in 9800 for my services and you have a deal.”

“Done. Do what you think will help this kingdom. Lani, you protect the gate, and I’ll have Steiner and several of the others protect our shores. I think they’ll want to come in from the sea.”

“That sounds right,” agreed Zidane. “Our navy and airship fleets aren’t as good as our military, so

the enemy will want to hit us from the waters. But what about—” Garnet suddenly stopped Zidane with a look, a look that told him a thousand things without the use of a single word. *She* knew what he had almost said.

“They are no longer part of this kingdom,” said Garnet eventually. “They are living their own lives. They are no longer obligated to help. In fact, I wish that they would not. They have earned this rest, don’t you think?”

“...Yeah,” he sighed after a pause. “I see your point. Okay, I’m sorry. Anyway, we need to call Lindblum for air support, since the enemy might attack from above. Can somebody summon Moguo?”

“I’ll do it!” shouted a page. He scurried off to call the world’s fastest moogle; in the meantime, the king and queen prepared to defend their kingdom yet again. They gave orders left and right, organizing their troops quickly and quietly while telling several messengers to get all the civilians indoors. It was impressive the way the two young people controlled the kingdom, but after their experiences with Kuja, Ignus, and Iudicium, this next threat would be an easy one. As they gathered their forces and prepared

their defenses, however, Amarant quietly slipped away...

“...Did you get all that?”

“Kupo! Sure did, kupo. A request to Lindblum for air support, right?”

“And what else did I tell you?” Moguo paused briefly and tried recalling what the very tall, red-haired man had told him.

“Oh yeah!” he exclaimed. “You want me to find the dragoons and the former General, right? And relay the message to them, right?”

“You got it,” whispered the man. “Right... now go. I dunno, but I think we might need their help.”

“You sure that’s a wise idea, kupo?” asked Moguo. “I mean, they’re all living happily, kupo. They’re not a part of this kingdom anymore. Do you really think they’ll come to help, kupo?” Salamander shrugged.

“I dunno. That’ll be up to them. Either way, we’ll see. Now hurry; we’re losing time.”

“Right! I’m on my way, kupo!” Moguo saluted the flaming one, and scurried off into the distance to relay the two messages. Secretly, Amarant smiled to

himself as the moogle sprinted away. Sometimes—not often, but sometimes—he could do something selfless. The fate of the kingdom was in his hands once again, and this was one of those defining moments that would test the fate of everybody—including three old friends who had been given permission to live out their own lives, without the need of fate or destiny.

“We’ll just see what happens,” murmured Amarant quietly to himself. “You’ve already been on the road for a long time, but I have a feeling that your journey has just begun...”

In the gentle quiet of the morning, there was an enjoyable silence that filled the air. The warmth of an early summer day was slowly reviving the world, bringing into it light and heat and just a tiny bit of love. There was a carefree feeling in the fragrant air, mixed in with marigolds and sunflowers and goldenrods strewn across a meadow. The delicious scent of dew on grass rose up into the air and mixed into the potpourri, and a certain woman let out a quiet yawn as she cuddled up closer to the object she had numbly felt in her sleep. It was just another lazy, hazy morning in the cottage, and all three residents

were enjoying it to the fullest. Fratley was out fishing, but the ladies...

Beatrix yawned again, swallowed, and softly opened her eyes. Hazily, she could see the outline of her friend Freya, who was also opening her eyes. Suddenly, the girls snapped awake, and let out a brief shriek as they jerked away from each other. They both fell out of bed and landed with a nasty thump on the floor, which woke them up for good. Both Beatrix and Freya groaned, and nursed their behinds as they stood to formally greet the other.

“Ugh, you startled me,” groaned the brunette. “I guess after all these months, I can still have my wits knocked outta me if I wake up to a rat.”

“I’m surprised we both screamed out like that,” replied the silvery-haired one wearily. “You’d think that after all this time...”

“Yeah,” sighed the brunette. She groaned and rubbed both eyes until she could see clearly again. A cursory examination around the room baffled her. “...Huh? How did I end up here? I thought I was sleeping in my room. Ugh, don’t tell me I sleepwalk.”

“Okay, I won’t,” shrugged Freya. Beatrix gave her friend a weary look, but tried her best to ignore the comment.

“Things can’t stay dull around here,” she groaned as she helped Freya tidy up the bed. She asked aloud where Fratley was, but since Freya had just gotten up—with Beatrix to greet her instead of her husband—she didn’t know either. Beatrix assumed that the only male among them was out fishing or swimming. By accident, Freya had discovered a nice pond a short walk away from the cabin, and the three friends would often swim there if the weather was good. Beatrix had been naughty and went skinny-dipping at night on more than one occasion, but that was just another benefit of being so free.

The ladies got dressed into casual summer wear, one in white and the other in green, and went out to see where Fratley was. As Beatrix thought, the Burmecian was out by the lake, using his tail as a fishing rod. He had not caught any fish yet, but it didn’t look like he intended to. Since his back was to the lake, Fratley had set up a canvas, and was doing a landscape painting while relaxing at the pond. He ceased and waved as his “two favorite ladies” came out, and pulled his appendage out of the water (sans fish) to give them both a hug.

“Hi honey,” he said as he gave Freya a kiss. He smiled simply at her, and winked at Beatrix before hugging her as well. “You two ready for another day here?”

“I don’t know why we should even prepare,” said Freya. “There isn’t anything to do, unless you want to use your imagination.”

“I feel like riding chocobos,” said Beatrix suddenly. Both Burmecians gave their human friend a look, but they thought it was a nice idea, so they agreed. Freya went back to the house for a handful of Gysahl Greens, and went in search of chocobo tracks so she could hunt the noble birds down. One of them was peacefully pecking at the ground in search of insects, but chose to eat the more delectable greens as it saw Freya approach. She came back in a moment, leading the chocobo by a rein. Beatrix thanked her, but asked where the other two were.

“I thought you wanted to ride alone...”

“No, why would I do that?” she said. “...Or do you two not want to come with me.”

“I think we’ll stay here,” said Freya. Beatrix silently nodded her head, and stirred her steed into a

steady trot. The lady Beatrix was enjoying her retirement to its utmost, doing everything she had been unable to do while in the service of Alexandria. Some things she did were so strange that even Freya had to question her sanity, and some were so sweet and beautiful that Freya had to wonder why she didn't do any of it before.

I felt like I would be making a fool out of myself, Beatrix had replied. *A General does not act that way. I had to be so strict and formal that it drove me insane. Of course, things did change once Garnet was on the throne—and more so when Zidane joined her—but old habits die hard. But now I feel like I can do anything without repercussion.*

Even... say, running around in that field completely naked? Freya had said. Beatrix had smiled and nodded her head.

Oh yeah. As a matter of fact, that sounds like a good idea. You wanna join?

...ME??

Sure, why not? Haven't you ever done anything like that before?

Well, I..... No, actually, I haven't.

And... what's stopping you now??

Those had been good times, when the world was in the palm of her hand and anything was possible. There truly was nothing that could stop her; nothing at all, least of all the rules she had to live by back in the kingdom. Beatrix's love of Alexandria was not questioned, but she certainly didn't have the same love for all the rules she had to endure. The transition from General to free wanderer had done her good, and for that, Freya was happy.

"Fratty?" she said as she looked over at him. "Now that we're alone, may I offer you a proposition?"

"You may." She grinned, and took his furry hands into her own.

"Let's do something naughty while Trixie's away!" she squealed. "Let's run around the meadow completely naked, then make love in it!! Come on, what do you say?" Fratley chuckled out loud, his face just slightly flushed from his wife's suggestion, and answered her with a twinkle in his eye.

"I say, last one there's a rotten egg!!"

It had been the good life for many, many, many weeks now. Beatrix continued to muse about Alexandria when she had the time. She would think about Zidane and Garnet, and of Steiner, of course, and the family that had adopted her into their home. She thought of her beloved circus, and where her old friends might have been at that time, and she let pass through her mind the memory of her Master Atma and her first love. She even saw the ghosts of her parents, who had been there for her when Death seemed ready to slam its scythe down into her heart. It had been a good life, but now, a wrench was being thrown into the works.

Fratley, who was relaxing on the slanted roof of the cottage, noticed a tiny trail of dust in the far distance. He squinted at it, and tried to peer as closely as he could at it. The cloud grew and grew as whatever was causing it came closer and closer, and at first, the Burmecian thought it was a storm of some kind. Faintly, in the whispers of the wind, he could hear a familiar cry of “Kupo!”, and leaped down from the roof as a speedy moogle came into view.

“What the...” Beatrix and Freya joined Fratley, and stared at the hasty moogle kicking up dust. The little critter finally slowed down once it came within

range of the cabin, and collapsed on the ground from sheer exhaustion. Its tiny mouth was wheezing for air, and Fratley rushed to its side to see what was the matter.

“Little moogle, why are you in such a rush?” he asked. “Where are you headed?”

“...Air! Air!...Need... air... kupo!” gasped the poor thing. Fratley understood, and plucked his hat off his head and fanned the creature with it. Beatrix and Freya helped, but it took some time before the moogle had caught enough of his breath to speak.

“Are you okay?” asked Freya. The moogle looked over to her, still out of breath, and tried relaying the message.

“Going... to Lindblum... kupo. Give... message... to Regent... kupo.”

“Is something the matter?” The poor moogle drew in a breath, swallowed, and told them all its entire purpose for being there.

“Invasion... Alexandria..... There are enemies... in Alexandria!!”

“Oh, Lord...” Freya softly whispered out in amazement, and covered her mouth as months and

months and months of peace and happiness came crashing down upon her. She was catatonic for awhile, but managed to look to Beatrix to see her reaction. The slightly-older woman was emotionless, deep in thought and pondering over things slowly.

“...I see... And you are going to Lindblum to request aid?”

“Yeah...” sighed the moogles. “King... and Queen... asked me... kupo...” Beatrix remained calm and unreadable, seemingly to absorb everything. Freya finally shook her, and looked into her eyes with a hint of desperation.

“We have to help them,” she said. “I have no idea what’s happened, but they may need our help.”

“No!” stated Beatrix. “We can’t..... we can’t do that.”

“...*What?*” spat Freya. To be honest, that was the absolute last thing she expected to hear come out of Beatrix’s mouth. “Beatrix, what are you saying?? Are you just going to leave Alexandria to the mercy of some enemy?”

“Freya, that’s not our home anymore!” exclaimed the one-time General. “We don’t live there! We don’t even live in the territorial boundaries of the

kingdom. It's not our problem anymore! Yes, I know it sounds terrible, but Alexandria is no longer our responsibility. We're not obligated to defend it anymore. Do you understand?"

"...But... Beatrix..."

"Freya, listen," said the woman in a soft voice. She took hold of her friend's shoulders, and looked her right in the eye. "Freya... you and I both know that if we were still there, we'd be the first ones out fighting. But we're not. We don't live there anymore. It's no longer our business. Do you understand?"

"But how can you—"

"I already told you," sighed the brunette. "Besides, like you said, we don't know a lot about this enemy. It could be a human's army, or it could just be random monsters. Whatever it is, the people there can handle it without our help. We're only three people, Freya. Don't you think that Alexandria can handle an invasion without three people? Whoever it is, it can't be a big threat—otherwise, we would have heard about it by now."

"How do you know that?"

“It took Iudicium years and years to amass that army he had, and the only reason we never heard of it was because he was on another continent and Brahne thought that the Iudicium family was dead. There’s no way that we can have another enemy like him, or anything that’s even close. Trust me when I say that the kingdom will do fine on their own.”

“Whoa, are you sure about that, kupo?” asked the moogle. Beatrix smiled sadly, and kneeled down to speak to the fuzzy creature properly.

“Yeah... I know my former kingdom well. Shoot, I’ll bet even those wacky Pluto Knights will be able to handle things! Besides, it’s no longer our concern. I don’t want to sound cold or anything, but it just isn’t. I’m sorry if I come off as insensitive.” Beatrix blandly gave Freya a gaze, and then Fratley, who seemed neutral on the topic. The way she felt did sound cruel and uncaring at first, but Beatrix’s logic was usually right. Not a one of them held any more allegiance to the kingdom. They were free, free from the responsibilities of protecting the place, and free to allow the kingdom to fight its own battles.

After thinking about it for awhile, Freya eventually agreed.

“You know what, you’re absolutely right,” she said as she attempted a smile. “Alexandria is not our home anymore. We don’t need to go save it every time there’s an enemy in the trenches! I’m sure you’re right—they’ll be just fine.”

“If you’re trying to trick me into going, it won’t work.”

“No tricks,” guaranteed Freya with a look of honesty. “No tricks, really. I agree—we have no business there. Of course, I also agree that it sounds cold, but it’s really not our place. I mean, if you *want* to help out...”

“That kingdom is no longer my home,” said Beatrix in a hollow voice. She quietly left the area to be off by herself, to think or sing or scratch herself or eat some food or to do whatever she did when nobody was looking. Even though she had been completely honest when she said she agreed, Freya couldn’t help but think that Beatrix was being just slightly apathetic. Then again, she didn’t have anything to eat for awhile, either.

“What do you think, Fratley?” she asked. Her mousy husband shrugged and guided the moogle into the cabin.

“I think our fast friend here should rest for a few hours, and maybe get something to eat. Does that sound good?”

“Kupo, you’d better believe it!” exclaimed the moogle as it did a little jig. “I’m so hungry I could eat the pom-pom that’s dangling over my eyes!!”

When nobody was looking, Beatrix slipped into the pond, and dove down deep in the water, until her long braids of brown began to snake upwards like so much seaweed. Here, with only the waters clothing her, she could be at peace, and could let her body and soul wander wherever they wanted. There would be nothing that disturbed her, unless it was one of her friends, and she would never refuse their company, even at times where she wanted solitude the most. But Beatrix went undisturbed, and stayed deep under the water for forty-five seconds.

Just then, the surface of the pond broke, and another body joined hers deep in the water. Beatrix opened her eyes and could barely make out her friend Freya, who seemed to have the desire to swim with her. Freya silently pointed at Beatrix, then at herself, then at the surface: “You and I should go

up.” Beatrix understood, and swam up with her friend. As they surfaced, she drew in a deep breath of water, and parted her long hair out of her face. If one looked close enough, one could see that she resembled herself during those days when she still had that patch on, only maybe a fraction older. Freya, a drowned rat in the most literal sense of the word, gave her friend a soft gaze as she stayed afloat.

“Can we talk?” she said. Beatrix shrugged.

“Sure—if you don’t mind doing it in the tub.”

“I don’t mind. There’s nothing you have that I haven’t seen before, and I’m a pretty good swimmer. You?”

“Swimming was part of the curriculum in knighthood training,” she replied. “But I already knew beforehand, since Master Atma taught me. So, what do you want to talk about? Oh wait, is this about what I said about not going to help Alexandria?”

“Sort of,” replied the Burmecian. “Beatrix, if you think I’m here to pass judgment or question your motives then you’re wrong. I really do agree with you. It really isn’t our place, and besides, this could

be a very minor issue. How much do you want bet that our friend Amarant has told everyone about it beforehand?”

“I’d bet whatever I have left,” replied the ex-General with a smile. “But what else is on your mind? If you agree with me, then what’s to talk about?”

“I just like talking with my friend,” said Freya with a warm smile. She paddled closer to Beatrix, and found a rock to stand on so she wouldn’t have to swim to keep afloat. Beatrix swam over to the side, and grabbed hold of the muddy edge of the pond so she wouldn’t have to swim much either. If Fratley ever chanced by that area, he would have called out to see if they were around, like the gentleman he was.

“...So do you miss it?” asked the Burmecian. Beatrix lowered her gaze and remained quiet for awhile.

“...A little.”

“I bet you miss Steiner.”

“Yeah...” Freya smiled.

“A lot?”

“Yeah...”

“You loved him, didn’t you?”

“Still do,” said Beatrix with a wink. Freya let out a dramatic sigh and placed her soggy head on her friend’s shoulder.

“Ahh, young love... That takes me back...”

“Get off, you crazy!” Beatrix chuckled and shoved poor Freya back in the water. The mousy woman emerged with a wild smile, filled with the crazed intent of a Burmecian bent on revenge.

“Oho! You have spirit, girl! Ya want me to dunk you too?”

“I’ll fight you!” exclaimed Beatrix. She gave Freya a shove, but Freya grabbed the other woman’s arm and tossed her into the drink.

“But I’ll beat you, as always!”

“Hey! Quit it!”

“Give up! Say you give up!”

“Never!!!”

“Beatrix? Freya? Are you around here anywhere? Ladies?”

He could search all he wanted, but Fratley Irontail would not find either one of them. They were nowhere near the pond—they had gone off elsewhere without his knowledge—so without either one of them present, he smiled and stripped off his clothes. Fratley loved dunking in the pond as much as his female comrades did, if not more—and of course, he would sometimes have Freya in there with him for very... *long* periods of time.

But on that day, he soaked by himself. It had been one day since Moguo, the world's fastest moogle, had sprinted past their little cottage and went straight for Lindblum, and so Fratley was expecting to see a convoy of airships fly overhead any minute. Until then, he rested and relaxed in the pool, not that he really did anything strenuous anyway. He let out a sigh, and absorbed the pure tranquility of a midday summer afternoon.

This is the life...

A yawn escaped his mouth, and birds flocked overhead as the predicted airship fleet appeared. Fratley smiled and waved at the group of five ships, but something else in the sky caught his attention. He noticed an extremely rare purple moogle floating around not too far away, and as he sat up from

looking at the sky, he could see a pudgy golden moogle trotting towards him. With a smile and a noble nod, he greeted both Artemecion and Stiltzkin.

“Sir Artemecion! Sir Stiltzkin! What brings you two famed mogs over to our cottage?”

“So this is where you three have been hiding all this time, kupo!” exclaimed Stiltzkin. “I was beginning to wonder where General Beatrix and Dragoon Freya were once we passed by the kingdom.”

“She is no General now, noble moogle,” replied Fratley. Stiltzkin mumbled something and nodded his little golden head.

“Ah yes, that’s right. I forgot, kupo, I forgot. Anyway, I passed by Alexandria, and I couldn’t help but notice that the place was under a siege, kupo.”

“A siege, lord Stiltzkin?”

“Yes,” replied the moogle. “A veritable invasion that looks to be lasting some time. The enemy’s not flooding the streets yet, kupo, but who knows what will happen in time...” The moogle trailed off, digging his stick in the ground and muttering to himself. Fratley did some thinking on his own, and

waded towards the moogle so he could speak with him properly.

“Sounds like things aren’t going so well.”

“No, they’re not,” replied Stiltzkin. “I think they’ll be able to hold them off, kupo, but it looks like the three of you left the kingdom without anyone to really fill your shoes. It seemed as if Lady Lani and Lord Steiner were doing well, but I ran out of there as fast as I could, kupo!”

“Speaking of which,” said Artemecion as he descended, “why aren’t the three of you out there helping them? I thought you would be, kupo!”

“Alexandria is no longer our concern,” replied Fratley gravely. “We no longer live there; thus, it is not our obligation. At least, that is what Lady Beatrix said, but I feel differently. I am sure that even my wife Freya feels the same as I, but she agrees with her friend in order to keep her pacified. Deep down inside, though, I’m sure we’re all unanimous.”

Silence overcame the pond area for awhile as the dragoon and the moogles each mentally labored over what they had heard. Fratley quietly pulled himself

out of the pond and swathed a towel over his body while he waited for the moogles to reply.

“Speaking of which, where are the other ladies?” asked the purple one suddenly. “They’re not with you, are they kupo?”

“No, I have no idea where they are. As far as I know, I’m all alone. Why, do you wish to speak with them?”

“No, not really,” answered Stiltzkin. “We just wanted to know. Anyway, kupo, I guess you should be made aware that Burmecia is also under attack.”

“What?!?! You jest!”

“No, it’s true!” insisted the moogle. “But don’t worry, kupo. From what Artemecion and I saw, it’s only a skeleton force. The Burmecians and that human girl, the psychic, are taking care of it. The thing is, though, they can’t spare a single soldier now that they’re locked in combat, kupo, not even one. It seems to be a clever ruse to keep any nearby allies away while the real enemies have their fun! Kupo!” Fratley growled and cursed to himself, clenching his fist until the water fell out of it.

“Things have taken a turn for the worst,” he stated with a hiss. “Burmecia and Alexandria... it all

seems like one big feeling of *déjà vu*. I have to tell the others about this...”

“But didn’t you just say that Alexandria is no longer your concern, kupo?”

“Alexandria, maybe,” replied Fratley in a stern voice. “But Burmecia was my home. It was where I grew up! I shed my own blood for that country! I nearly saw its end, twice!! I swore an oath long ago that I would protect that town, and I will go so far as to break my pride and my promises to see that it’s done!”

“Well bravo for you, kupo!” exclaimed Artemecion. “It’s nice to see that somebody around here is making sense! But are you going to do anything about Alexandria, kupo?” Fratley drew in a deep breath, and let it burn inside his lungs for a long time before he released it. He respected Beatrix and her feelings, and would not convince her to go against something she believed...

But as his father always told him, there were just some things more important than justice and pride.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said slowly. “I cannot guarantee you anything, not even my presence at Burmecia. I will not go a step further by myself—I

owe it to Freya to stay by her side—but Lord willing, if the ladies decide to go, then go we shall. Need you moogles anything more here?”

“...Actually,” said Artemecion shyly as he waddled up close to the pond, “you mind if we take a quick dip in the pool?”

Night now covered the land. On that particular summer evening, the moons were out and waxing well, just barely past the halfway point into becoming full. Stars lit up the sky, all of them twice as bright and brilliant now that there were no other lights to dim them out. The air was warm, with a good wind that soothed a soul into relaxation, and the pond sang out with the symphony of lapping water, frogs, and crickets. It was a good time to be alive, so of course Beatrix stepped outside to absorb the night.

As she was bathed in moonlight and starlight, she heard a peculiar sound coming from the roof of the cottage. It was somebody singing a song, a very beautiful but somewhat sad melody. Beatrix listened through the whole song, absorbing the words and what possible significance they might have had...

*So far away from my home, sweet home
Day by day, from land to land I roam
Though told by the wind which way to go,
Oh, how I long for my home, sweet home.*

*You can come home in times of harshness.
You may come home in times of sorrow, too.
Your home will be waiting for you forever.
It will be waiting for you forever.*

*Fragrant blossoms blooming far away—
Do my folks see them as I did long ago?
Are they still joyful? Are they young at heart?
Will I see them again as I did that day?*

*Family, friends,
Home, memories.
No one will ever
Forget about you.*

*How far I've come from my childhood home!
There will come a time when my troubles are gone,
And when I shall not be all alone—
Till then, I dream of my home, sweet home.*

*Forest, stream,
Sky, Earth
Everyone is waiting,
Waiting for your return.*

When it ended, she smiled and climbed up on the roof, finding her dear friend Freya sitting there, hugging her knees to her chest and staring up at the sky. The people at Tantalus would have called that a “heroic profile”, and Beatrix thought she did indeed look quite noble sitting there by herself, underneath the dark sky. She quietly joined Freya, and gave her friend a gentle nudge to tell of her presence.

“Where’d you learn the song?” she asked. Freya smiled and let her legs hang loose once again.

“...My mother used to sing it to me before tucking me in at night. It’s strange, really, but I’ve been able to remember it for all my life. You’d think that the years would erode something like that, but no... I have a clear recognition of that song.” Beatrix smiled, somewhat amazed herself, and scooted a little closer.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Thanks. You know, dreams and memories have a funny way of working. You remember when I told you about my experience in Memoria?”

“Yeah.”

“...I heard that song being sung to me once again, in that realm of memories. I... I knew it the

moment I heard the tune, and I was never able to forget it, either. Just as the summoners of Madain Sari have a song to remember, so I too have song which is close to my heart. You know..." Freya paused, and chuckled to herself as another old memory appeared. "You know... I even saw you in Memoria."

"Me?" Freya nodded her head.

"Yes. At first I thought it was the memories of Steiner or Garnet, but then I noticed that your image and the images of my past were too well-connected. I didn't know why you were among my memories back then... but now, I think I have it figured out." Beatrix gave her buddy a grin, and scooted closer still until they were shoulder-to-shoulder.

"That's really interesting. But why did you suddenly feel the urge to sing that song? I haven't known you to be a singing person, and I've had enough time to find out."

"I'm usually not," said Freya with a shrug. "But I suppose... the events of recent have spurred me into song. You know: the business at Alexandria, Burmecia being under attack, and the three of us living here, wasting our lives away in a false sense of freedom."

“False sense of freedom? Is that how you feel?” Freya gave her friend another shrug, sighed, and laid down on the roof so she was looking directly up at the sky.

“It’s more than that,” she continued. “That song is a nostalgic ballad that’s to be sung by wanderers who are out in the world searching for their place in life. It’s a tune to remind them that they will always have a place to return to, even as they scour the corners of the globe. I think it’s a fitting tune, considering what we’re doing right now. I mean, aren’t we all just trying to find a place where we can be most comfortable and most happy? Aren’t we on this journey of life to discover who we are, and where we’re supposed to be, and what we’re supposed to be doing?”

“I told you that I’ve been looking for a place to call home all my life,” she continued. “Ever since I left D’negel, I’ve been searching for that one place where I belong, the place that I will return to one day. Zidane has made a similar journey, and so has Vivi—we *all* have to make that same journey sometime in our lives. I thought that Burmecia would be my place, but after Fratley left and I parted ways with the kingdom, I began to have second

thoughts. Once the war ended, I returned, and... well... we all know where this leads.”

Freya stopped talking for awhile, letting her friend think things over as the warm night air comforted them both. Beatrix had heard all of this before, but now that they were alone and free, it seemed more relevant, more genuine, more... significant. Freya had been wanting to find her place in life ever since she was born, and even now, it still didn't look like she would find it. Deep inside her heart, Freya felt that Beatrix was looking for exactly the same thing. After all, why else would she have insisted on living out here?

“I understand what you mean,” said Beatrix gently. “I’ve been after the same things that you have. It’s funny how similar the two of us can become. We really do make an awesome pair.” Freya merely smiled.

“Yes, we really could almost pass as sisters...”

A pause.

“Beatrix?”

“Yes, dear?” Freya sat up, and looked her friend square in the eye. A mixture of emotions were stirring up in her liquid-green eyes.

“...I want Alexandria to be my home...” Beatrix returned Freya’s gaze with as much gentleness as she could muster, smiled, and placed her hand on her friend’s furry cheek.

“You wanna know something, Freya?”

“Yeah.”

“...So do I.”

“Really?” Beatrix kept her smile as she nodded her head. “But... why did you say...?”

“I just had some growing to do,” whispered the former knight. “I just had to reach out into the world myself, and really think things over. I had to mature and learn by myself—I had to be *free* for once in my whole life. And now that I’ve experienced it, I can safely say that I know what I have to—no, I know what I *want* to do.”

“And what’s that?” asked Freya. Beatrix’s smile grew even more, and she pulled the other woman into a tender hug.

“...I want to go home.”

“Bea..... yes, of course... Let’s... let us go... back to where we once belonged...” The two ladies shared a smile, and Freya leaned forward to gently

kiss her buddy's brow. Beatrix growled playfully, and pinched the other woman's arm.

“What? You didn't think that I'd abandon my friends and family in their time of need, did you?”

“It never crossed my mind,” said Freya wryly. She and Beatrix both leaped down from the roof, and headed inside the cottage to tell Fratley. ‘So,’ said Freya as they did all this, “when do you want to leave? Tomorrow?”

“Dawn,” stated Beatrix as she opened the cottage door. “I want to leave at dawn.”

As the red sun rose up over the land, a trinity of chocobos and travelers could be seen milling around. Provisions were loaded onto the birds, and feelings and emotions were loaded onto the three friends as they packed up to charge back into their destiny—but from the other direction. There was no more question in Beatrix's mind. She was going home, back home to where she felt she truly belonged, and her two dear friends were accompanying her, into their own homes. Destiny and fate no longer held any grasp over any of them;

they were bound by their will and their desire to be happy.

“You know,” said Fratley as he mounted his chocobo, “you are a very fickle person, my friend.” Beatrix smiled and gladly admitted to the fault of hers.

“Yeah, I know.”

“I wouldn’t know *where* you’d get it from,” he muttered in return. Freya glared at her husband and slapped his leg as her own ride trotted past him.

“Fratley! I hope you weren’t referring to me when you said that!”

“Of course not, dear!” he replied. “You know I would never speak ill of a loved one!” Freya smiled at his response—still smooth as silk after all these years—and guided her bird over to her friend for one last confirmation that everything was okay.

“Trixie, is this what you wanted?”

“What more *could* I want?” replied the woman wisely. “I have good friends here and many loved ones back in the kingdom, a life full of accomplishment and prosperity, and a place where I know I can belong. Need I any more?”

“No, I suppose not.” Freya smiled, gave her loved ones a wink, and spurred her chocobo to ride off. Fratley bade Artemecion and Stiltzkin a fond farewell, and he and Beatrix joined the beloved dragoon as they all rode off, back into the distance, into the rising sun, like three heroes returning from a long and weary conquest. They had all faced the brutalities that life had inflicted upon them—oftentimes even confronting each other in the process—but their loyalty and love for each other was always going to be constant. Their greatest difficulties might have still laid ahead of them, on the journey of life, but as long as they held true to each other, then every day would be a new joy.

Beatrix paused just briefly in order to allow her mouth to hang wide open. She actually shed tears as Alexandria came into view once again—the home she had loved, and land that she served, the place of refuge and safety and love for a weary soul like hers. She smiled out of complete bliss, and shivered for joy. Freya saw her, and couldn’t blame her friend in the least. Somehow, Beatrix managed to guide her chocobo up to the main gate, where the guards

nearly fell over from shock upon seeing her. They both managed to salute, and squealed out her name.

“Please don’t salute me, soldiers,” sighed Beatrix. “I am no longer in a position of esteem. I have returned here to live out the rest of my life as an ordinary citizen, neither General or knight.”

“We don’t care, Beatrix!” exclaimed one of the guards. “We’re saluting because we’re so happy to see you! We... always believed you would come back to us one day!” Beatrix returned their smiles, and hopped off her chocobo to give them each a hug.

“Thanks... you ladies. That means a lot to me.”

“Welcome home, Lady Beatrix!” sobbed the guards happily. Beatrix shuddered happily at the simple greeting, and gave both woman a beautiful smile.

“Yes... I am home now!”

“Erm, Trixie-darling!” snapped Freya suddenly. “Aren’t we forgetting something?”

“Oh, goodness! I nearly forgot about the invading forces!” Fratley and Freya both rolled their eyes, and if the situation wasn’t so happy and dire, they would

have laughed. Instead, they both leaped off their rides and produced their weapons.

“Come on, Beatrix! Let’s not dilly-dally! It looks like we have our work cut out for us!” Beatrix agreed, and excused herself from the guards so she could join her friends. As she ran back into the streets of Alexandria—for good and for ever, this time—she drew her sword and smiled out of pure happiness.

“I can’t help but think that you’re enjoying every second of this!” exclaimed Fratley with a smile. Beatrix returned it without holding anything back.

“Of course! I’m home, aren’t I?” Fratley agreed, and as it always seemed to be, some random creature ruined the moment with a terrifying roar. It was a dragon, one of many who had overrun the kingdom. The adrenaline pump of battle surged through their veins, and the three friends prepared themselves to fight once again. Freya summoned up everybody’s feelings with just a single, bold, joyful sentence.

“Well, here we go again!!”

@——**THE END**——@

Table of Contents

Title Page	1
Copyright Information	2
Table of Contents	3
Summary	4
1. Dilemma	5
2. Homecoming	70
3. Vengeance	142
4. Results	197
5. Restoration	248
6. Janus	304
7. Holocaust	382
8. Balance	448
9. Apocalypse	541
10. Trials	650
11. Problems	828
12. Free	906